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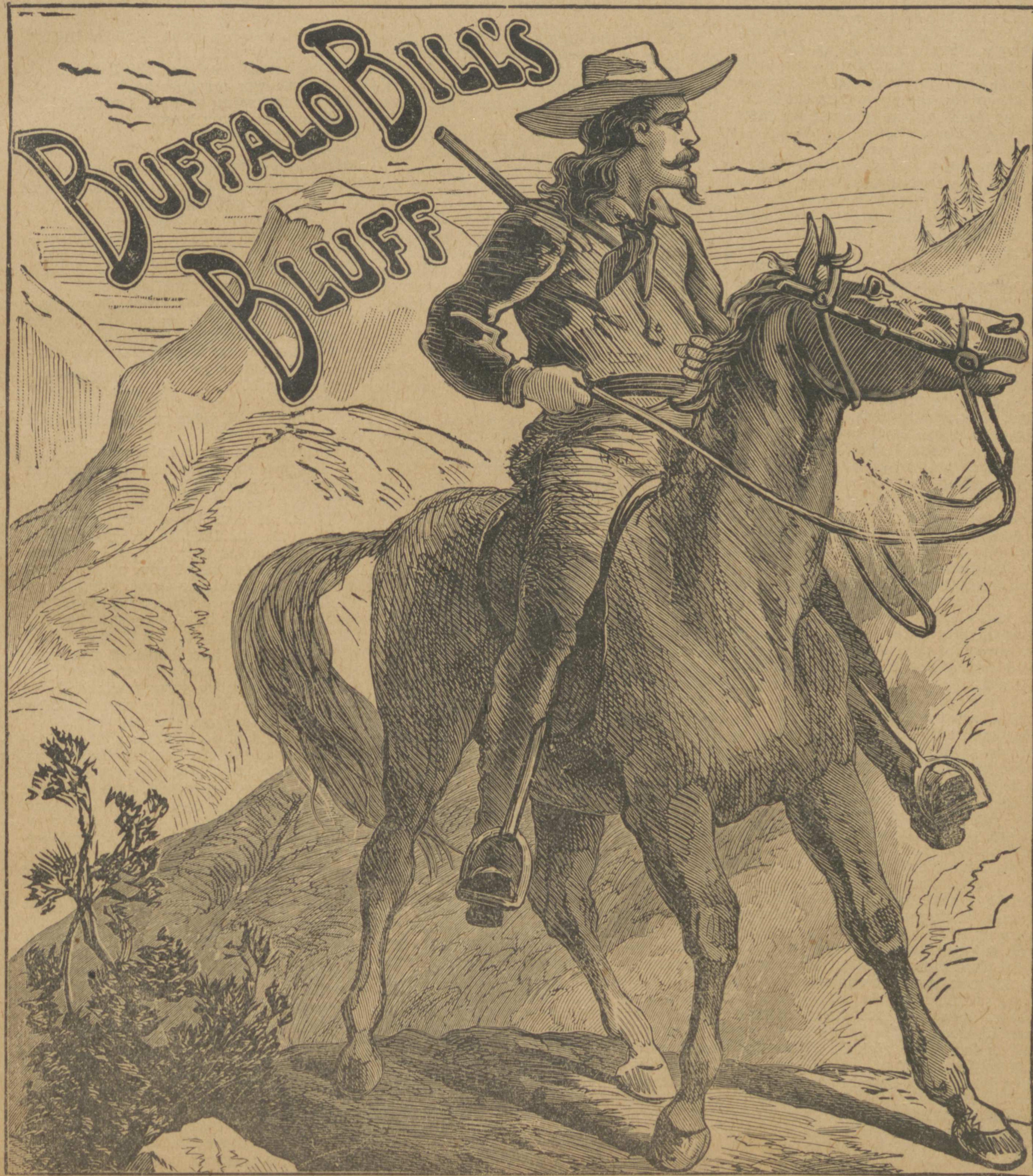
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BUFFALO BILL TRAILING THE MOUNTED SHARPS.

Buffalo Bill's Bluff;

OR,

DUSKY DICK, THE SPORT.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SCOUT-DETECTIVE.

"Is this a bluff, Buffalo Bill?"
 "No, sir. I am in deadly earnest."
 "I cannot believe you."
 "I stake my life upon the result."
 "Let me understand fully, for, as well as I know you, as thoroughly as I trust you, and believe in your power to do that which the bravest men shrink from, I can but look upon what you now say other than, as we call out here, bluffing."

"Again I repeat, sir, that I mean just what I say."

"With a full knowledge of the situation?"

"Yes, sir; just that."

"You will undertake to find out who the spies are that are in the Overland Company's service, track down the outlaws who act upon the information their spies give them, ferret out in fort, camps and stations the true men from the false, clear the trail of the danger we now have to face almost daily?"

"I will do all that, sir."

"And on what terms, Buffalo Bill?"

"I have certain terms to make, sir, in that I am to be trusted wholly, have full sway in camp and on trail, and my orders are to be obeyed without question."

"Agreed!"

"But, what are your terms in the way of payment, if you accomplish what you pledge yourself to do?"

"I am a Government officer, sir, and as such draw my pay."

"You surely do not intend to work for nothing, when your life any moment may be the forfeit?"

"I accept only my army pay as scout, sir; but if circumstances, to carry out certain ends, cause me to make a demand upon you for funds, I shall do so."

"And you shall promptly be supplied; but, in sending to headquarters to request that you be detailed to me to go on this special duty, the Overland Company expected to pay you handsomely."

"No, sir; I accept no money outside of my legitimate pay."

"The general asked me if I would volunteer for the work which you had written to him about, and as it came within my line of duty I did so volunteer, and I now report to you, sir."

"And boldly assert that you can do what I ask?"

"If I live, sir."

"And it is not a bluff?"

"My game will be one of bluff, sir, in many ways, but I mean what I say to you; the bluff is for those I am to hunt down."

"Then command me at your will, Cody. Anything, everything is yours that I can give. When are you ready for work?"

"Now, sir. That is what I am here for."

"Good! I have just had a letter from California, telling me that a gentleman who struck it rich out there, in mining, as well as marrying the daughter of a wealthy Mexican rancher, is coming overland in a coach he chartered, and bringing with him his only child, a daughter, two servants and a large amount of treasure."

"He is foolish to risk it. Why does he not go by sea?"

"The letter says that he went by sea to California, and was so dreadfully seasick he would not go that way again for his fortune; so we furnish him his coach, horses and driver, and he pays big money for the accommodations. He thinks that by following an hour or two

behind the regular coaches on their runs he can avoid being held up on the trail, for no notice is to be given ahead of his coming."

"Perhaps he can get through, sir, and we shall have to do our best to aid him, for on that all may depend."

"Let me know again, please, just how many there are?"

"The ranchero, whose name is Lee Insley; his daughter, whose name I do not know, but I believe she is a young lady grown; two servants, along with their baggage and, the letter says, a very large sum in money."

"And, keeping to the same coach, you are to furnish them with horses and drivers right through?"

"Yes, and riding horses, too, when they care to take to the saddle for a rest between stations."

"And now, sir, you have an idea that among the people you employ are to be found spies in league with the road agents who hold up the coaches and thus give them notice when there is anything of value to go through?"

"I am sure of it, Buffalo Bill."

"No one knows that this California ranchero and his daughter are to go through?"

"You are the only person I have told, and it is to be kept secret at the other end of the line, the driver ahead only reporting their coming in time to prepare for them, for they want and must have the best."

"Then let me ask you, sir, to put that letter under lock and key at once, and we will see if any one gets the news."

"I will do so, and speak of it to no one."

"I will begin duty at once, sir, and whatever I do here, or where I may go, or what I appear to be, just understand that I am playing my cards to win this game I have entered upon—a game of bluff, may be, but to be played to scoop the jack pot."

"Shall this be our compact, Mr. Winter?"

"Yes, Cody; a compact of honor, duty and pardship, in which I leave all to you."

"Then the compact is signed, sealed and registered. I am ready for duty, sir, at once," was the reply of the Scout-Detective, for such had Buffalo Bill become in entering upon the service he had set out to perform—a service whose dangers, mysteries and consummate daring this romance will record.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNSEEN FOE.

Several hours after this interview and compact with Loyd Winter, the superintendent of the most deadly and dangerous part of the Overland Trail over which the coaches of the company had to pass, Buffalo Bill was riding quietly along a rugged mountain path, apparently wholly indifferent to his surroundings, but in reality keenly on the alert for anything that might transpire.

He well comprehended that he was on a most dangerous part of the trail between Outfit City, the headquarters camp of the Overland Company, and Death-Trap Canyon, the latter having long been a dead line against the further advance of civilization into the then terra incognita of the Wild West.

The nature of the country after leaving Outfit City was such that it afforded the best of hiding places for outlaws, renegades and hostiles, and many a driver had been killed, who attempted to run the gantlet of the road-agents, and his coach robbed of all he carried of value.

It took men of iron nerve to drive these coaches, and of late affairs had been becoming so that large prices were paid to the man who dared handle the reins over a trail dangerous in itself to drive, without the added fear of being held up by road-agents or greeted with a shot from some lurking redskin.

But, Buffalo Bill rode serenely along, making his first reconnoisance over the

trail he had undertaken to clear of human pests.

He had been given a map of the trail for nearly a hundred miles on each side of Outfit City, and the places of the robberies of the coaches and killing of drivers and passengers, had been marked, and was anxious to take all in so as to thoroughly know his ground and surroundings.

He had ridden perhaps a dozen miles away from Outfit City, and was nearing a place which had been particularly fatal to the Overland Company, so he was on the alert, though not appearing to be suspicious or apprehensive of danger, for lone travelers were often halted as well as the coaches.

"Halt!" was the greeting that welcomed him.

"A dozen guns have you covered, Buffalo Bill!"

The command was in a tone that admitted of no misunderstanding, and Buffalo Bill drew rein, remarking in a drawling way:

"I guess I'd better obey, then, pard."

He did not appear surprised; he simply accepted the situation as a matter of course, and with the uttered acquiescence awaited the result.

"Where are you going, Buffalo Bill?"

"You know me, I see?"

"Yes, better than you think I do."

"But, answer my question."

"I am returning to Fort Faraway."

"Where have you been?"

"To Outfit City."

"What for?"

"To carry dispatches that had to go through, so I made sure of taking them beyond where you might get them."

"What were these dispatches?"

"I am not in command of this department."

"But you know."

"If I did I would not tell you."

"Do you not know that they were asking for escorts to be allowed for the coaches over this mountain run?"

"No, for you outlaws don't scare anybody very bad as yet."

"Don't we?"

"No."

"No man will drive or ride this trail without big pay."

"I draw only my regular pay."

"You are an exception; but you are no driver or pony rider."

"I am a scout."

"Well, as you have not been very hard on us, we don't bother you; but I want information now."

"I ask no favors of you, or your cut-throat gang," said the scout, hotly.

"It may come to asking but receiving none, if you ever turn your hand against the Mounted Sports of the Overland."

"See here, I have heard of you as a bad lot, but it has never been my duty to be sent on your trail; if I am sent some day, I'll not be scared off by threats, you can go high on that!"

"That is just it, Buffalo Bill. I believe you have been sent to Outfit City now to help Loyd Winter corral us; but it won't go; we are on the romp and not to be corralled by one or fifty Overland ropers-in."

Buffalo Bill laughed lightly, and replied:

"I am an army scout, not a clearer of gallows birds."

"Come, state your business, for I wish to be on my way?"

"It is to give you a warning, that if ever you take the trail against, or raise hand against the Mounted Sports of the Overland, your days are numbered."

"Thanks! Are you Captain Coolhand, the head imp of the Mounted Sports?"

"I am."

"Well, you are afraid to show your face; you dare not let me see you, or your gang; you talk to me from ambush; is that a true sport's style?"

"That is all right, in this case. We wish you no harm; but I repeat, Buffalo Bill, if you take our trail, then it means certain death to you."

"I suspect you of intending war against us, and so give you fair warning, for the first hostile act against us by you sounds your death knell."

"The Mounted Sports are in the saddle for big stakes, and they are on this trail to stay until their fortune is made, so do not raise hand against us if you value your life."

"Now go on your way!"

Twice did Buffalo Bill call to his unseen foe, but got no response, and so rode on his way once more.

CHAPTER III.

THE BLACK HORSEMAN.

Buffalo Bill rode on his way considerably impressed with his interview with his unseen foe.

There seemed something uncanny to him in the fact that he had been under the muzzles of deadly weapons, warned of death by the very men he had formed a compact with Loyd Winter to run down, and yet had not seen one of them.

Why had they shown him mercy, when merciless to others?

He frequently was known to carry large sums of money between the fort and the Overland stations, and yet no attempt had been made to rob him.

He had had no demand made upon him for gold.

A very shrewd guess, if guess it was, had been made as the reason for his going to Outfit City, and it showed him that he must be on his guard against his business being discovered.

The outlaw leader had simply warned him not to take the trail of the Mounted Sports, or his death would follow.

This had been all, and then he had been allowed to go on his way unmolested.

This the scout could not account for.

Riding quietly along, he began to muse to himself, and it was evident that he was troubled by what had occurred.

Being fired upon he could have understood, but the treatment he had met with surprised him very much.

"There may have been a dozen rifles covering me, as he said, but I doubt it."

"To my mind, there was but one, and yet I dared not take the risk of trying to make him show his hand, for he might have had others near."

"There certainly was a good hiding-place for a hundred men there, and on my way back I will have a look at that spot and see what trails were left."

"That man's voice I have got down fine, and will know it when I hear it again, if it was not disguised to-day, and I do not think it was."

"He said he was Captain Coolhand, the leader of the Mounted Sports, and maybe he was."

"Mr. Winter thinks the gang numbers about forty, some say even more, but no smart man would divide spoils with so many when he could do better work with half that number, yes, even with less, for they don't openly fight; they kill from ambush, rob and run."

"Knowing the whole country as they do, they readily get away and safely seek their hiding-places."

"I admit that it did seem bluffing in me to tell Winter I would hunt down this band of cut-throats, and without aid, too; but, it can be done, and I'm on the trail to stay, whether I play the open hand of Buffalo Bill or the secret one of some one else."

"Now, I am coming to where there is another place marked upon the map Winter gave me, as a favorite spot for hold-ups by the Sports—ah! who have we there?"

Musing on he rode along. Buffalo Bill had yet kept his eyes well ahead on the trail, and his remark had been caused by suddenly seeing a horseman ahead of him.

"Why, he must think I'm a road-agent, for his hands are held above

his head at mere sight of me," muttered the scout, and as he drew nearer to the horseman his eyes became fixed upon him with a look of strange interest.

The man who barred the way, though certainly with no hostile intention, as he held his hands up as though in token of surrender, was either a black man or wore a black mask.

He rode a jet-black horse, and there was no glimmer of brass or silver on saddle or bridle.

He was dressed in black, from foot to sable sombrero, and his appearance was certainly most sombre.

"His face is not masked, nor is it blacked—he's a *bona fide negro*," muttered the scout as he drew nearer.

He saw that the man possessed a fine physique, that he was well mounted and armed, and yet there he sat on his horse in token of abject surrender before the scout got within pistol range of him.

"Some deserter from a colored regiment, who is lost and anxious to go back and take his punishment, after what he has experienced since he left his fort," decided Buffalo Bill, and he rode on at a quicker pace, yet wholly on his guard, for he did not know but that there might be some plan to entrap him, in the man's show of surrender.

He felt that he might have comrades near, and having just passed through a strange experience with outlaws, the scout did not care to be caught napping again.

As he drew near he fixed his eyes upon the face of the Black Horseman, who, he perceived, was a negro, pure and simple, and after a moment he muttered:

"I know him, now!"

"It is Darkie Dick, the Black Burglar. "This is indeed a valuable find!"

CHAPTER IV.

DARKIE DICK, THE BLACK BURGLAR.

"Hello, Darkie Dick, you here on the frontier yet?" called out Buffalo Bill, as he drew near to the negro horseman.

"Yes, Massa Bufferler Bill, I hain't gone yet."

"I is still here," was the answer, and in a very melancholy tone.

"And are willing to go back with me to the fort, and give up your stolen goods, I take it?"

"Massa Bill, I hain't stole nothin', and I hain't willin' ter go back to ther fort, nuther."

"Why are you here in my trail, then?"

"Kin I let down my hands, sah, 'cause they gits tired holdin' of 'em up?"

"Yes, for nobody told you to hold them up; but had you not done so, and I had caught sight of you, I'd have sent a bullet after you."

"But mind you! no monkey business with me, for you know I can use a revolver quickly and with deadly aim."

"Lordy, Massa Bill, I would hurt my old grandma afore I would *you*, for I hain't forgot how you saved me from ther redskins, sah."

"No, sah; I trusts myself now in yer power ter have a talk wid yer, and I seen yer comin' so waited fer yer."

"Well, what is it, Darkie Dick? Time is precious, you must know."

"I knows dat, sah, and so am dis niger's life."

"I tell yer, sah, I hab had a tough time since I done left de fort."

"You have only yourself to blame for it, for you proved a thief to those who trusted you, broke into the homes of the officers and robbed your best friends, while, worse still, you killed the sentinel on guard in making your escape."

"Oh, Lord! oh, Lord!"

"Massa Bill, I didn't kill no man, sah; 'fore de Lord, I did not, sah!"

"The man was killed, and you were gone with all the booty you could rob the camp of, though how you escaped the force sent after you I cannot tell."

"But, it is my duty, now, to take you back to the fort, and the chances are, Darkie Dick, that you will hang for your crimes."

"Massa Bufferle, Bill, hear me talk, sah!" and the negro spoke with impressive earnestness.

"Well, what have you to say?"

"I didn't put myself in your power to be taken back to de fort, sah, but for another purpose."

"I hain't no born fool, if I is black, and I tells you, sah, dat no man on earth does I regard more higher dan I does yer; but I'd fight it right out now wid yer, if you war ter say I hed ter go wid yer back to de fort."

"You've got good nerve, at least."

"I is in dead arrest, sah, and I tells you de truf."

"I hain't rob nobody, altho dey says so, and I hed ter git out ter save myself, dat's what!"

"You tells me dat I kilt de guard, sah, but I did not do it, and I didn't know no life was taken until you jist told me."

"I left de fort, yas, sah; and left a name behin' me dat is blacker dan my face, and all is agin me, Massa Bill; but I tell yer, sah, dat I hed a purpose I can't tell yer in goin'—at least not now—but I hopes ter, some day, and I wants you ter trust me, sah, not ter believe all dey says I is, and I don't blame 'em fer it. I wants yer to jist let me work in my own way and show yer, in de Lord's good time, dat ef I has a black skin I hain't got no black heart."

Buffalo Bill's eyes were riveted upon the negro as he proclaimed his innocence.

He had always liked the man, as did all at the fort, and it was a great shock to one and all to find him missing one morning, the sentinel dying upon his post, yet able to say that Darkie Dick had killed him, and then have the discovery made that the quarters of the officers had been robbed, the paymaster's safe opened, and numerous strong boxes skillfully burglarized and a large amount of money and valuables taken.

The whole garrison was turned out to pursue the negro murderer and burglar, and Buffalo Bill and his whole company of scouts were for days on the trail, but all in vain; Darkie Dick, the colonel's trusted body servant, could not be found, and here, six months after, the scout met him waiting for him in the stage trail, and with hands up in token of apparent surrender!

But, in looking into the face of the negro, Buffalo Bill saw there that which caused him for the first time to believe that, in spite of the circumstantial evidence of his guilt, he might, after all, be innocent.

So feeling, the scout said:

"Well, Darkie Dick, I supposed you were by this time in a foreign land, enjoying the fruits of your burglaries, and I never recognized you until close upon you."

"Then I very naturally supposed your conscience had driven you to surrender and take the consequences of your crimes; but you tell me that you would fight to the death rather than surrender, that you are no burglar and murderer, and left the fort for a purpose, while you have trusted yourself in my power for some reason you have not yet explained."

"Now, what is it you wish, for if I did not have a belief that, after all, you might be innocent, I would arrest you, or have it out with you right here, for I know well your great strength, your unerring aim and undoubted pluck."

"Come, now tell me what you have to say."

"Massa Bill, de Lord bress you for dem words dot says you believe I may be innercent, sah, and I tells yer now, I intends ter prove it, on'y yer must let me work in my own way."

"Now, I can't tell yer what I is doin', why I left de fort, and no more dan dat I seen yer go ter Outfit City dis mornin' arly, and I jist waited for yer comin' back, fer I has something ter tell yer, sah, so I has," and again Darkie Dick spoke impressively.

CHAPTER V.

A DOUBLE MYSTERY.

"I am waiting to hear what you have to say, Darkie Dick, and I tell you frankly, I do not like your having placed yourself in my power, trusting to my honor, for it is my duty to arrest you," and Buffalo Bill spoke in a tone that showed the Black Horseman that he meant just what he said.

"I see dat you don't believe me, Massa Bill, dat you t'inks I is de bad nigger dey calls me," said Darkie Dick, reproachfully.

"What else am I to think, for I have only your word against facts that point to your guilt."

"I find you here now armed to the teeth, splendidly mounted, on the Overland Trail, and appearances are terribly against you."

"Dey is, sah, dey is; dat's gospil trufe; but, as I tolle you, I seen yer goin' to Outfit City, an' I jist laid fer yer return."

"Well?"

"Massa Bill, I don't want yer ter ax me no questions, kase I hain't gwine ter answer none of 'em, but I wants ter tell you dat dere am a Californy gent, an' his darter, wid a coach full o' money, and two sarvents a-comin' over de Overland Trail on dair way East, and dey is ter be held up and robbed; de young leddy is ter be tuk prisoner until her pa pay a big lot o' gold ter let her go. I tells yer dis dat you may sabe 'em from it all, for I knows you kin do it."

"How did you learn this, Darkie Dick?"

"I hain't talkin', sah."

"You refuse to tell?"

"Yes, sah."

"But, you know these people are comin'?"

"Yes, sah."

"When?"

"Dey is expected along in de next three days, sah, maybe is now not far away."

"And the Mounted Sports of the Overland know of their coming?"

"Dey does, sah."

"Then I am to look upon you as one of the outlaw band of Mounted Sports?"

"I hain't sayin' what I is, Massa Bill, but yer kin jist believe I is tellin' der trufe, sah, when I says ef yer don't sabe dat gemman an' his darter, yer'll feel sorry for it."

"I will try, but, how am I to go about it?"

"I hain't givin' you no advice, Massa Bill, fer you knows. I only tells you dey is comin', dat dey is ter be robbed, maybe somebody will get kilt, and you knows what ter do, fer a escort along wid 'em would save 'em."

"How many outlaws are in the band?"

"Massa Bill, you is keen as a brier ter catch dis nigger, but I hain't bitin' at no bait."

"Do you know I was halted back on the trail a few miles?"

"No, sah," and the negro started.

"Well, I was, and by the Mounted Sports."

"Did you see 'em, sah?"

"No."

"Dey didn't pull no gun on you?"

"They had me covered."

"Don't git skeered, sah, for de Mounted Sports hain't goin' ter kill you, Massa Bill."

"Why not?"

"Wall, sah, I hain't replyin' to no questions, but dey is not, though dey will try and make you believe dey is dead onto you."

"Dey does b'lieve dat you is layin' fer 'em now, and will do all dey kin ter scare you off, but den you hain't one of de kind ter skeer bad."

"Yer say dey held yer up, sah, back on de trail?"

"Yes."

"Does yer mind tellin' me what was said?"

Buffalo Bill told all, just as it had occurred. The negro listened attentively,

and seemed to be very uneasy, glancing up the trail anxiously.

At last he said: "I gotter go, Massa Bill, but I'll be round when you don't know whar I is, and you knows I is your friend, and I gwine ter make you mine when I kin."

"I tanks yer, sah, for not tryin' ter take dis nigger pris'ner, fer it would only be you die, or me, and some day I tell yer what I hain't able ter do now."

"Good-by, Massa Bill, and don't fergit ter sabe dat poor young leddy and her pa."

The Black Horseman politely raised his hat as he spoke, and was turning away, when Buffalo Bill called out:

"See here, Darkie Dick."

"Yas, sah."

"Your trust in me prevents a death struggle between us now. I let you go; but, remember, if you are playing any game on me, there will come a day of reckoning between us; mark my words, for I'll track you to your end."

"I hain't goin' ter fergit, Massa Bill," and the negro rode quickly away out of the trail, as if anxious to get under cover.

Buffalo Bill watched him disappear from sight, and then muttered:

"Now, have I done right to let him go? I hope so. At any rate, I shall find him again, now that I know he has not fled from the country."

"Is he innocent or guilty of the robberies at the fort, and of the murder of the guard?"

"There is some mystery in it all, and it is but increased by his trusting me as he did, and the knowledge he has of the coming of the Californian, which Loyd Winter thought had been kept so secret."

"I will go back to where I was held up, and take the trail there, and return to-night to Outfit City to tell Winter that his secret is known."

"Then I must go ahead on the trail and meet the Californian, guiding him around all danger from the Mounted Sports."

CHAPTER VI.
THE SCOUT SURPRISED.

Having decided upon his course, Buffalo Bill rode back over the trail toward Outfit City, going in a canter.

With it known to the Mounted Sports that the Californian was coming along the Overland, the scout felt that he must make known to Loyd Winter that the secret was in the possession of the very ones from whom they had wished to keep it.

He, Buffalo Bill, must know just when the Californians were expected, that he might head them off, and guide them by a long trail around the ambush of the outlaws.

His meeting with the negro, Darkie Dick, had been a strange one, and yet the more he thought it over the more he felt that the fugitive colored man might not be guilty, as everyone at Fort Faraway believed him.

"I wish I had time to take his trail," he said, as he rode along.

"But that will follow later, after I have saved the Californian from the outlaws, and when I settle down to the business of ferreting out the spies the Mounted Sports have in the Overland Company's service, for by such means alone the secrets become known of when gold is to be sent through, and when there are rich passengers to rob."

"Now, this secret of the coming of the Californian is known to the outlaws very soon after Winter himself gets the news, which but proves that some spy is very close to him, or else the party is being shadowed along the trail."

"The Mounted Sports certainly have it down fine, the way they are working things to commit crime; but then they can be downed, as other bands of crooks have been."

"Now, for a look at this spot where I was held up, and see just how many outlaws there were."

Halting, Buffalo Bill dismounted and

hitched his horse, and on foot began the search.

He had not been long at his work before a puzzled expression came over his face.

He had evidently made a discovery that surprised him.

After a good half hour of searching thoroughly among the rocks and timber, he said:

"Well, I was either held up by one man, or all the others he claimed to have must have been on foot, for I can find only the trail of one horse."

"Next time I shall make them show their hand."

"If that was Captain Coolhand, and he was alone, then he is indeed a cool hand at his work, and no play intended on his name, either."

"I wish I had fired at chance, for sometimes I have hit dead centre on a guess, and I'll spot him from the sound of his voice."

"I am getting mystified and no mistake, but the more mystery there is the more interest I take in my work."

"Now for a rapid gallop to Outfit City. Ah! I hear the coach coming, and—"

Buffalo Bill halted suddenly, for he had heard the rumbling of wheels around a bend in the trail, and he knew that it was the coach from Outfit City to Death-Trap Canyon.

The driver seemed to be pushing his horses along at a good pace, too, from the sound of rapidly moving hoofs and wheels.

But the sound had ceased suddenly, as though the coach had been brought to a quick halt, and there came to the ears of the scout the sharp tones of a voice in command, though the words he did not catch.

"Hold up, by Jove! I'll chip in there, though the odds are doubtless big against me."

As he spoke, Buffalo Bill settled himself well in his saddle, drew a revolver in each hand, and set his horse going in a run, while loud, clear, and commanding his voice was raised, shouting to imaginary comrades: "Ho, pards, they have held up the coach! Now at them!"

A hundred yards or more he sped over, the bend was swept around at full speed, and some distance ahead on the trail he beheld the coach at a halt.

Upon the box sat the driver, Left-Hand Larry, who waved his hat around his head as he shouted:

"Hooray! Buffalo Bill and his scouts!"

"We is all right now, pilgrims, when Buffalo Bill chips in."

The last words were addressed to one or more persons in the coach, as the driver leant far over and looked down into the open door.

Another moment and Buffalo Bill dashed up and called out:

"Ho, Larry, in the hands of the Philistines, eh? But, where are they?"

"I was corralled, Buffalo Bill, but your coming scared off the niggers."

"Negroes?" asked the scout, in surprise.

"Well; maybe I should hev said nigger, fer I seen but one, though I has an idee others was around, and he lied if ther wasn't, fer he said he hed men ter back him."

"How was he dressed and mounted?"

"He was ridin' a black horse, and he was dressed like a undertaker, all in black."

"Darkie Dick, the Fugitive Negro," muttered Buffalo Bill in a low tone not meant for the driver's ears.

CHAPTER VII.

LARRY'S THREE PASSENGERS.

"What did yer say, Buffalo Bill?" asked Left-Hand Larry, the driver, and so called from the fact that he always used his revolver with his left hand, and his whip as well.

He was a frank-faced, fearless-looking fellow, and was known as a splendid driver, and one who would take chances when other men would back down.

"You say that the road-agent was a

Buffalo Bill's Bluff.

"negro?" and Buffalo Bill answered Larry's question by asking one.

"He was, ef looks goes fer anything, a great big black nigger, dressed in black, and ther only white about him was the whites of his eyes."

"And the others?"

"Didn't see no more—he were enough."

"But you heard them ride away as I came up?"

"No I didn't, and guess he were alone."

"He were agin that black rock thar, and I didn't see him until he called out fer me ter halt."

"I saw he had me covered, and I put the brake on quick."

"Then I seen that what I took fer a black mark were black skin, and he rode toward ther coach callin' out that he was out fer gold and would get it ef he had ter kill."

"My pilgrims inside groaned, and were that scared they begun ter rob themselves ter hand out ther dust, but just then we heerd the music o' yer notes, and ther nig he jist backed out o' sight behind ther rock, keepin' me covered with his gun, and he went tearin' away as though ther devil had sent fer him."

"I tell yer, Pard Bill, its gittin' ter be strange times on ther Overland when niggers is tarnin' road-agents, and I is lookin' for a Chinee ter hold me up next time."

Buffalo Bill laughed, but asked:

"Who have you along, Larry?"

"Two gents and a man as may be one, but don't look it, though appearances is deceivin', as yer knows."

Buffalo Bill rode up to the side of the coach and glanced in, with the remark:

"Good-evening, gentlemen!"

Two of them replied politely, and their appearance indicated that they were not men of the border.

They were dressed in corduroy hunting costume, and had the look of young men out on their first Wild West journey.

The third man was a different looking individual, for his clothes, boots, and hat were new, and he had the look, to an experienced eye, of a plainsman trying to play tenderfoot.

His face was darkly bronzed, save where his beard had lately been shaved off, as though for disguise, and his hands were large, rough, and those of a working man.

"We have to thank you, sir, for saving our money, and we carry a large sum, I may say—if not for saving our lives," said one of the young men.

"We are going out to Fort Faraway to visit friends for a couple of months, to have a hunt for big game, and we have valuable luggage along, which you have saved for us, and we hope you will allow us to reward you, sir," explained the other.

"Thank you, sir, but I accept no reward for doing my duty. I am Chief of Scouts at Fort Faraway, and have heard of your coming, for your friends have been expecting you for weeks, if you are Messrs. Sprague and Sanford."

"Yes, I am Burt Sprague and this is my friend, Maury Sanford. Your name we have not heard."

"Then yer was that bad scared that yer didn't catch it, pard, fer I told yer we was all right, as Buffalo Bill were on hand," cried Left-Hand Larry.

"Buffalo Bill!"

The name broke from the lips of the young men together, while Larry answered:

"Yas, Buffalo Bill, called at his christenin' William F. Cody, and ther whitest-hearted man in this country."

"He are ther best scout, Indian fighter, and all-round good feller—"

"Hold on, Larry, or these gentlemen will think you are in my pay to sound my praises!" cried Buffalo Bill, fairly blushing at the words of the driver.

"Well, I know yer," was the answer.

"And, so do we, sir, for we have heard and read much of Buffalo Bill, and I assure you we are glad to have been rescued by one so distinguished."

"In our visit out here business is

combined with pleasure; consequently we brought along with us considerable money, more than we cared to lose; so we owe much to you, as does also this gentleman, who told us he had a small fortune with him."

Buffalo Bill's eyes turned upon the third passenger, who seemed to be trying to shrink back out of sight from the moment the scout had ridden up.

In the thanks extended to Buffalo Bill for driving off the Black Horseman he had uttered no word; but now, when appealed to by Burt Sprague, he seemed to withdraw still farther back, while he muttered:

"Yes, I have a very large sum with me—going to invest in the mines, you know. I thank you, sir, for saving it; indeed I do!"

Then, to the surprise of all, Buffalo Bill quickly covered the man with his revolver and said sternly:

"Hands up, Nick Ross!"

"I want you—hold! crook a finger and I'll send a bullet through your heart!"

CHAPTER VIII. A COUNTER-CHARGE.

Left-Hand Larry was as much surprised at the sudden and threatening action of Buffalo Bill toward his third passenger as were the two young men who were on the way to the fort.

But the driver knew enough of the scout to feel that he was not one to act without good reason, and instantly stood ready to back him up in this bold act, for he called out:

"If he's a bad one, Pard Bill, I'm with yer!"

"Is this the way you protect your passengers, sir? I shall report you to the superintendent, for I am a detective in his employ," called out the man who was covered by the scout's revolver.

"If you are, then, Mr. Winter has got hold of a bad man for a detective and does not know you—as I do," retorted Buffalo Bill.

"Who are you?"

"A detective should know when he heard me called Buffalo Bill."

"Driver, I appeal to you for protection against this highwayman."

"You is away off ther trail, pard, for that don't go down. I knows Buffalo Bill and don't know you, and that's a big difference. I chips in with William every time."

"Larry, do you remember the Post Trader, Nick Ross, who was found out to be a road-agent a year ago, and just escaped hanging by killing one of my scouts, whom I sent as his guard to the fort?"

"I does, and there's money up on him."

"Yes, a thousand dollars for his capture dead or alive."

"I don't care for the reward, as I never take blood money, but I've got the man, and will take all responsibility of making any mistake."

"Slip these handcuffs on him, while I keep him covered, and then search him, Larry."

"I'll do it, William; bet your moccasins!"

"I appeal to you, gentlemen, for protection against this outrage," called out the man to his fellow passengers.

"Pardon me, but as this gentleman is a Government officer, he doubtless knows what his duty is," replied Mr. Sprague, while his friend said:

"Yes, we are sorry for you, but if innocent you have your redress."

"Gentlemen, as I said, I am responsible for my actions. I know this man in spite of the great change he has made in his personal appearance, to be the man I accuse him of being—Nick Ross, a one-time trader, who was recently an outlaw."

"There, Larry, bundle these things up and carry him with the prisoner to the fort, telling Colonel Duncan that I send him in, and accuse him of being Nick Ross, the Renegade Trader."

"I'll do it, Pard Bill."

"He told us that he had thousands of

dollars with him, sir, and seemed most particular to learn just what we had, i recall now," observed Maury Sanford.

"His thousands do not appear to materialize, however, nor that is all he had," and Buffalo Bill pointed to the small roll of bills and a little silver money the man had with him, for nothing else save his weapons had been found upon him, by Larry's close search.

Having firmly secured his prisoner, Buffalo Bill turned him over to the driver, bade the two young hunters a polite good-evening, and, mounting his horse, said:

"Keep a bright look-out, Larry, as you may be halted again, for I happen to know that there are more outlaws abroad than the negro who held you up."

"I say, Pard Bill," called out Larry, as Buffalo Bill was about to ride away.

"Well, Larry?"

"What you say kinder scares me off, for I has got a pretty big sum of money along with me."

"I am sorry, for I fear you will be held up."

"Whar is you bound now?"

"To Outfit City."

"Couldn't guard us to the fort?"

"I would, Larry, but I have a very important duty on hand just now; but I'll send several men after you from Outfit City."

"It would be too late, for if I'm held up again it will be within the next thirty miles, so I say fer you to take the boodle back to Outfit City and turn it over ter ther boss ter keep until its safer ter send it through."

"So I will do if you wish, Larry."

"And will you assume the responsibility of our money and valuables also, sir?" asked Burt Sprague.

"If you wish, but I am one man only, and may also be held up and robbed."

"But the chances are in your favor rather than ours."

"Yes, for it is but ten miles into Outfit City."

"Then we will turn over to you all we have, to be sent through when you think it safe."

"Hold, all of you! and heed or not, as you please," said the prisoner earnestly.

"Well, what has you ter say?" asked Larry.

"I assert that this man is not Buffalo Bill, the scout, whom I know well."

"Remember, he accuses me of being an outlaw, and Nick Ross, the one-time trader; but I tell you that I am a detective in the employ of the Overland Company and was sent along to guard the treasure the coach carries and the money you two gentlemen were known to have with you."

"That man looks very much like William Cody, strikingly so, I admit, but he is the outlaw, Shadow Bill, of whom you have heard often, driver, and this is but a clever game of his to deceive you all and get the booty, so don't trust your money to him, I beg of you, for you'll find it as I have said, and that I also am what I represent myself to be."

CHAPTER IX.

A BARRIER IN THE TRAIL.

Even Left-Hand Larry looked at the scout with suspicious gaze at this counter charge of the man accused of being Nick Ross.

The charge seemed so plausible that the two young men were impressed by it.

The man saw his advantage at once, and added, quickly:

"See here, driver, cover that man and take him also a prisoner into the fort, for I will take my chances of proving that I am an Overland detective and that this is Shadow Bill, the outlaw, who is so like Buffalo Bill, the scout, he has often been called his double."

"Well, pard, what has you to say now?" asked Larry, fingering his revolver nervously, and turning upon the scout who had heard the counter-charge against him in silence, merely smiling.

"If you believe the man, Left-Hand

Larry, you and your passengers had better not trust your money to my keeping," he said quietly.

"That's so; but about taking you along, too, and having you show your hand."

"See here, driver, I have work to do, and will not stand any nonsense on the charge of that outlaw."

"I know of this Shadow Bill. He has more than once played some game of deviltry and put it on me; but you should know who and what I am."

"Of course, as strangers, knowing neither man, we cannot judge; but I'll stake my money upon my knowledge of human nature, and say this gentleman is the one he represents himself to be," Burt Sprague asserted, and promptly his friend replied:

"As will I."

"Pards, I'm with you, too, for though I had heard much o' that Shadow Bill, I'll chance this bein' ther real article, all wool and a yard wide Buffalo Bill from Wayback," added Larry.

The prisoner scowled at this, and said sternly:

"You will regret your decision, for I'll stake my neck that I am right."

"Your neck belongs to the law, as it is, and is already forfeited by your crimes, Nick Ross," said Buffalo Bill, and all saw that the words went home; but the man replied:

"And you'll hang before I do, when Buffalo Bill knows you are robbing coaches under his name."

This shot also told, but in favor of the prisoner.

But Buffalo Bill, making no reply, asked calmly:

"What is your will, Larry, about your money?"

"Take it, Pard Bill, and if yer does turn out to be Shadde Bill, then I gives up driving and goes on the war-path fer yer scalp."

"And we will go with you; but I have no doubt as to this being the man of whom we have heard so much, for if he is what the prisoner accuses him of being, then his face belies him."

"Thank you, Mr. Sprague, for your good opinion."

"I must be off now, for within one hour it will be night, and I wish to reach Outfit City soon after dark."

"Here is my money and my valuables also, sir, for you to care for," and Burt Sprague handed over the large sum he had with him, and a buckskin bag containing jewelry.

"And mine, too," and Maury Sanford also gave his possessions to the scout.

"Here goes ier a big wad of Government boodle, and if you be Shadde Bill, and not Buffalo Bill, then yer has got enough ter retire from ther road-agent biz," said Left-Hand Larry, and his face showed that he was not wholly assured in his mind as to the identity of the scout.

"Yes, there goes a small fortune into the hands of an outlaw who has played you for fools and won his game."

"But, I warned you, please remember," said the prisoner.

For a moment it seemed as though the words would cause Left-Hand Larry to recall the money he had intrusted to the scout, but he saw that the two young men meant to stand by their decision and he determined to do so too, while Buffalo Bill remarked, with something of a sneer hovering about his mouth:

"I never quarrel with a man with a rope about his neck."

The prisoner winced, the scout raised his broad sombrero, and rode silently away, the others looking after him without a word.

At last the prisoner said:

"There goes your money, gentlemen; but I could do no more than I did to save it for you."

"If you is right, pard, I trusts no man in the future," called out Larry.

"I do not think we have made any mistake—what say you, Maury?"

"I am content, Burt," answered Maury Sanford, and the two young men mount-

ed the box with Larry, leaving the prisoner inside, and bound to the coach so that he could not slip out when darkness came on.

"There is such a character, then, as Shadow Bill, who resembles Buffalo Bill?" asked Burt Sprague as Larry drove on once more.

"There be, fer I has heerd o' his doin's often, an' they do say he is that like Buffalo Bill he could pass as his twin brother, and he plays the scout, too."

"I should think the scout would make it his business to look him up."

"He's layin' fer him, you bet, and will catch him some time, never fear; but I hopes that it were not Shadde Bill that hes got our boodle."

"So do I; but I think we are on the safe side, or honesty in a face goes for nothing, and I would stake my fortune that the man we trusted is no criminal."

"I feel the same way, Burt, and have no anxiety about my money," added Sanford.

He had hardly spoken before an exclamation broke from Left-Hand Larry's lips that fairly startled them, and both looked ahead to behold in the trail a horseman with a revolver in each hand calmly awaiting the approach of the coach, yet distant from him a couple of hundred feet.

CHAPTER X.

THE CHINEE ROAD AGENT.

The driver did not halt his team at sight of the horseman, who had ridden into the trail ahead of him.

He simply drew the horses from a rapid trot to a walk, and held his reins well in hand, ready to halt at the command of the road-agent.

The two young men were surprised and Burt Sprague said:

"He is alone, so let us open fire on him."

"Hold on, pard! Don't draw a weapon on, for them fellers don't travel alone, and there is plenty more ter back him."

Sprague let his revolver slip back into its holster, and decided that the driver knew best what to do.

Larry kept on until his leaders were within a few feet of the horseman; then he halted, as the man covered him with a revolver.

The spot was in a clump of heavy timber, with large bowlders scattered through it, and thickets here and there.

It was on a ridge, and on the left beyond the horseman the ground went off abruptly.

As it was just sunset the heavy timber made the place gloomy, so that the horseman was not plainly seen until the coach horses halted.

Then, with a quick glance, Larry shouted:

"Oh, Lord, but it's a Heathen Chinee, or I is a liar!"

"Me Chinee, allee samee, but me kildee Melican man quickee, he no givee monee."

The words were distinctly uttered and threatening, but Larry saw only a Chinaman, and he had for the race a supreme contempt, so said, with a sneer:

"I can kill, too, heathen, so show your hand."

"Melican man foolee—big foolee! Chinaman allee lightee; he not alone."

"I believes ther beggar is right," growled Larry, and he added:

"He would not play the hand he does if alone."

"We must go slow, for he can't rob us a little bit, and might kill."

"We will be guided by you, driver," Burt Sprague remarked, just as the Chinese road-agent rode toward the coach, a revolver in each hand, but he halted as he saw the prisoner's head thrust out of the coach, and seemed for a moment undecided as to what to do.

But he quickly put on a bold front again, and said as sternly as was possibly in his broken English:

"Me wantee monee pretty quickee."

"Well, you won't get it, for we haven't

got any, having been robbed a little way back by Shadde Bill," informed Larry.

"Melican man tellee big lie."

"He's right, Chinaman, for Shadow Bill did get a big haul; but, you can get me, for if they take me on to the fort I'll be hanged before I can be proven an honest man."

"Allee lightee! me takee you along, allee samee!"

"I guess you'd better not try it on, for that man is my prisoner," called out Larry in a determined way.

The Chinaman gave a shrill whistle, and then sat quietly on his horse, a sly grin upon his face.

The look and action spoke louder than words could have done; he felt that he was master of the situation.

"Take me, Chinaman, for I do not care to risk chances of going to the fort, though I shall put in an appearance later and show who and what I am."

"Allee lightee; me takee you; but wantee monee allee samee."

"You shall have it."

"Coachee got no monee?"

"Not a dollar! Shadow Bill got it all."

"No likee."

"And I don't likee hevin' to stop here chinning with a Heathen Chinee, so if you intend to take this man, do so, and let me go on my way."

"I half believe you have got no one near to help you, and I've a mind to make yer show your hand, Heathen," said Larry.

"Me showee!" and again the Chinaman gave a whistle. Instantly a voice answered:

"All right, captain! Shall we fire?"

"No, blast you! I'm not crowdin' yer!" quickly called out Larry, the response from the rocks convincing him that the Chinaman had help near, though in what force he could not guess.

"Allee lightee; no killee this time," cried the Celestial road-agent.

He called to the prisoner to get out of the coach and come with him.

"I can't, for I'm ironed and tied in as well," was explained.

The Chinaman gave another whistle, then rode up to the coach door, and, drawing a knife, cut the lariat that bound the prisoner.

"Wantee key," he said, laconically.

"I hain't got it, for Buffalo Bill took it with him."

"Buffalo Billee? Where Buffalo Billee?" and the Chinaman gave an anxious look about him in the gathering gloom.

"It wasn't Buffalo Bill, but Shadow Bill, Chinaman; but I don't believe he took the key," the prisoner averred.

"Then ask him, for here he comes!" cried Left-Hand Larry, and, as he spoke, all heard the rapid clatter of hoofs.

As quick as a flash the prisoner, his hands still manacled, made a bound out of the coach and disappeared in the thicket, while the Chinaman wheeled his horse and spurred into the timber with equal suddenness.

Larry called out: "Hold on, Chinaman, and I'll interdoose yer!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE THIRD HALT.

"Well, of all things I ever seen, this beats 'em—a Chinee road-agent on the Overland!

"I don't quite grasp it, but it were a fact, fer you seen him, gents, with yer own eyes."

So said Left-Hand Larry as the Chinaman disappeared in the gloom of the timber, as the prisoner had done.

"It was a Chinee beyond doubt," remarked Burt Sprague, while Maury Sanford answered: "Yes, but who have we to meet now?"

That was the question that was worrying Larry, for he heard the hoof-falls of quite a number of horses, coming at a rapid canter along the trail.

It could not be Buffalo Bill, unless he had returned with an escort for the coach, or had sent one after it.

Waiting anxiously the coming of J.S.

horsemen, Larry did not start his team again, and a moment after saw them sweep around the bend in the gathering twilight.

"Ho, Larry, is that you?"

"Halt!" cried a commanding voice, and a cavalry officer drew rein by the coach, while his men halted at his order.

"Oh, Lieutenant Keyes! It's you, is it, sir, and glad am I to see you, for we've had a rough time of it this afternoon," announced Larry.

"So I heard from Buffalo Bill, whom I met, and also that you had some guests of the colonel with you, and whom we have been expecting."

"I am Lieutenant Keyes, gentlemen, and I believe you are Messrs. Sprague and Sanford?"

The two young hunters responded courteously to the handsome cavalry officer, while Larry called out:

"It would be like lookin' for a needle in a haystack, lieutenant, but before you came up a lot o' road-agents had us foul, an' ther captain were a heathen Chinee, as I am a wicked sinner."

"Ah! and our coming frightened them off?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which way did they go?"

"Over ther ridge, sir."

"It would be useless to follow in the darkness, but how many were in the band?"

"We only saw ther Chinee, capt'in."

"A real Chinaman, Larry, a leader of road-agents?"

"Yes, sir, fer a fact."

"I have heard of such a man, yet hardly believed the story."

"It is true, sir, nevertheless," Burt Sprague said.

"And he fled at hearing our approach?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, from what Buffalo Bill told me, he could not rob you of much, as he gave me all you intrusted to him to carry on to the fort, and I suppose I had better keep it in my possession, as there might be such a thing as your being held up again, for I cannot remain as your guard, as I must hasten on to the fort now."

"Yes, sir, please retain our valuables and money," Burt Sprague said, while Larry remarked:

"You bet I wouldn't want to carry it on this run, lieutenant, for there's a hoodoo on me ter-day, I'm thinkin'."

"I will carry all safely through, and your prisoner, too, whom Cody told me about, for I have a led horse."

"Where is he?"

"Gone!"

"Where?"

"Escaped, sir."

"Ther Chinaman helped him off, though he's got Buffalo Bill's irons on him, and I has ther key."

"That is too bad, for the fellow is a gallows bird."

"I only wish I had come up with you sooner."

"But, I'll carry your treasure safely through, and I'll acquaint the colonel, gentlemen, of your coming, so he will be awaiting you."

"Good-evening, and permit me to hope that you will have no further delay and trouble on your way."

With this the lieutenant was away at a canter, followed by his escort of half a dozen troopers.

"A dashing young officer, that," said Burt Sprague, as Larry once more drove on his way.

"Ther hain't no better than he is, pard, fer I hev known Lieutenant Ed Keyes well and jist what he hev done."

"He'd fight old Nick with spurs on, he would, and he's a gent frum Wayback; but I guess we kin git through now without no more trouble, fer ther Chinaman went off as though he'd keep ther pace up all night."

"And the prisoner, driver?"

"Ah! I fergot about him."

"Maybee ther Chinee were thet scared

he fergot him too, and agin maybe he hed a spare horse fer him; but whatsover goes, I has got ther key to his irons," and Larry chuckled over the thought, and drove on through the darkness with a skill that was the admiration of his two passengers.

Thus, mile after mile was put behind the coach, a couple of relay stations had been passed and the horses changed, and Larry had just remarked that they were beyond all danger, when, with startling suddenness, out of the darkness ahead came the command:

"Halt that coach!"

CHAPTER XII.

A MYSTERIOUS CAPTURE.

"This coach is halted, darn yer," and Left-Hand Larry spoke in very ill humor, for his prophecy had been very quickly proven untrue, that they were in no further danger of being held up.

"This is really growing monotonous," Sprague remarked, while Sanford rejoined: "So long as they don't halt us with bullets I can stand it."

Having drawn rein, as commanded, Larry sat awaiting developments.

He had not long to wait, for a horseman rode out of the gloom and approached the coach.

"It hain't ther Chinee agin," muttered Larry.

"Nor the Black Road-Agent," added Burt Sprague.

"By rights it oughter be a Injun this time," growled Larry, and then he called out:

"Now, who is yer and what does yer want?"

"I am Captain Coolhand of the Mounted Sports—you may have heard of me?"

"I have, and too often, with nothin' in yer favor."

"You should not complain, Larry, for I have given you your life scores of times."

"Thankee for nuthin'."

"Well, what have you along that is valuable, Larry?"

"Seein' as yer cutthroats has held me up twice afore, nothin'."

"Who has held you up?"

"A nigger and a Chinee road-agent, so I were lookin' fer you ter turn out a Injun."

"Not so bad as that, Larry. But what did they get?"

"Nothin'."

"You had a rich freight along, though, as I happen to know?"

"Yas, I had, only did yer see an officer and his men pass a while ago?"

"Yes, but I get only steel and lead from soldiers, and it's gold I want."

"Well, yer won't get it this time."

"Why not?"

"The soldiers took it fer safe keepin'."

"Is this true?"

"It be."

"Well, you have two passengers with you that I wish."

"What for?"

"I have taken a fancy to capture them."

"Yer better change yer fancy, unless yer want every man in ther fort on top of yer."

The road-agent captain laughed and then replied:

"I take all chances, Larry, as you know, and I intend to relieve you of your prisoners—hold, there, gentlemen, for you are covered by a dozen rifles—stand ready, men!"

The warning was given at the sudden act of both Sprague and Sanford to resist, and the command was issued to men in hiding, for an answer came in a deep voice:

"All ready, sir."

"Hold, pard, don't throw yer lives away, fer he is jist playin' a bold hand ter make yer show yer gold."

"We have none, so he is foiled," Maury Sanford remarked.

"We want you; your gold we will finger later," replied the road-agent.

"Does yer mean ter kidnap these gents?" asked Larry.

"Yes."

"What fer?"

"I have reasons I cannot make known. But they go with me."

Larry quickly grasped the hand of Burt Sprague and the act certainly saved the life of Captain Coolhand, for in a second more the young hunter would have sent a bullet through his heart.

"Don't be a fool, fer God's sake," cried Larry, excitedly.

"Must we submit to capture with weapons in our hands to defend ourselves?"

"I am with you, Burt, if you say fight," cried Sanford.

"Gentlemen, as Larry said, don't be fools, for the odds are ten to one against you."

"An order from me would kill the three of you, and had you killed me your lives would have instantly ended."

"But, Larry, I owe you my life, for that was a close call for me, as I was caught off my guard."

"I shall not forget it," but whether he meant his close call or that Larry had saved his life was not quite clear to those who heard his words.

"Yer did have a close call and it should teach you a lesson, so let me go on now, for, with ther nigger, Chinee, and yerself holdin' me up I am away behind on my run."

"Come, git out o' ther way and let me start up my team, as we has nothin' fer yer ter git."

"Hold on, for I differ with you, as your two passengers are booty enough for me."

"Come, gentlemen, you must go with me."

The two young men seemed still half inclined to resist, but a low warning from Larry urged them not to do so rash an act, and he added:

"I is sorry, gents, but yer has ter go."

"I'll soon report it, and it won't be long afore you is free."

"Better go and save trouble."

"We will be guided by you, driver, fer you know best; but it seems cowardly to thus submit," Burt Sprague said.

"It is not, but rather common sense."

"Dismount from that box, gentlemen, one at a time."

They did so, and a moment after the road-agent captain called out sternly:

"Drive on, Larry, and tell Colonel Duncan that I have his guests in my keeping."

"Yas, and you'll be the colonel's guest afore long, or I doesn't know ther man," answered Larry, and, with a good-by to his two passengers, whom he had come to like and admire, he drove on his way once more.

At first he let his horses jog along, but after a short distance he started them into a brisk pace, determined to bear the news of their capture as quickly as possible to the fort.

Drawing down to a walk, as he came to a bit of ragged traveling, he heard the rapid clatter of hoofs behind him and at once he came to a halt, with the remark:

"What, agin?"

A moment after a horseman came into view through the darkness, and suddenly drawing rein as he reached the coach Left-Hand Larry called out quickly:

"Buffalo Bill!"

"Hooray fer you, pard, fer yer is ther very man I wants ter see."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MEETING ON THE TRAIL.

When Buffalo Bill rode on his way back toward Outfit City, after leaving the coach, he was considerably puzzled at what had been told him by Larry, of his having been held up by a black road-agent.

"It could be none other than Darkie Dick, that is certain, so the claim he made to being innocent must be false, though I really did trust in him."

"At any rate he gave me warning that the road-agents knew of the coming of

the Californians, and intended to rob them.

"But that must not be done, so I'll hasten back to Outfit City and tell Mr. Winter just what I have found out, and then I must ride for it to head off that extra coach and its treasure."

So mused Buffalo Bill as he rode along at a canter on the trail to Outfit City, keeping up the pace until his keen ears suddenly caught the sound of approaching hoofs.

Instantly he wheeled off the trail and sought shelter behind a large boulder, for he knew not who he was to meet.

And he stood ready, rifle in hand, to fight if he had to.

"Cavalry," he suddenly muttered, as he caught sight of a party of horsemen coming into view some distance down the trail, and he rode out of his hiding-place.

It was the party of Lieutenant Keyes, and the young officer greeted the scout most cordially as they met, the latter remarking:

"I'm awful glad to meet you, Lieutenant Keyes, for I am carrying more money than one man is entitled to, and I wish to place the responsibility of its safety upon you."

"All right, Cody, my shoulders are broad, and I am willing to stagger under all the money you can heap on," answered the lieutenant, who listened with interest to the scout's story of how he had come in possession of the money, and learned that the coach, with the two young men and the man Buffalo Bill had made a prisoner was not many miles on ahead.

"I'll overtake it by night, Cody, never fear, but what shall I report to the colonel for you?"

"Nothing, thank you, sir, for he knows what I am doing," was the answer, and so they parted, going their separate ways.

It was growing dark when Buffalo Bill once more drew rein, for again he heard hoof-falls approaching.

Going into hiding and with a keen watch ahead, he saw another party of horsemen approaching.

"Why, it is the boss," he cried, and riding out from his place of concealment, he called out:

"Ho, Captain Winter, I am glad to meet you."

"Why, Cody, this is lucky, for I have news for you. Come aside with me," and Loyd Winter left his escort of four pony riders awaiting in the trail, while he led the scout apart from them and said eagerly:

"I missed a letter sent through to me, for it went on to Good Luck Camp by mistake, and was at once sent back to me by the agent, a special pony rider bringing it."

"I hope it has not done much harm, sir, by the delay in reaching you."

"No, for finding you as I do there is time to act."

"You see, I started at once to see if I could find you, and if not to serve as an escort myself."

"For what, sir?"

"The Californians!"

"Ah!"

"You have heard of them then?"

"Yes, it was the letter from the agent at Death-Trap that was delayed."

"He wrote me that the California coach would leave Death-Trap a couple of hours behind the regular, and that would bring it to Fort Faraway at midnight, for the regular coach is due at Outfit City at breakfast in the morning."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, by hard riding you can head off the extra, for it reaches the trail you intended to guide it by around the regular beat between Faraway and Outfit City, thus flanking the part of the way most to be dreaded."

"Yes, sir, I can head it off in time, or even turn it back to take the other trail if it has passed where it branches off."

"Good!"

"Then it is safe; but had I not met

you I intended to go on and escort it through, though you know the company does not allow that; but I intended to make an exception in this case, there being a young lady along, and so much treasure at stake."

"It would be but right to do so, sir; but I hope I can flank the Mounted Sports all right."

"I sincerely hope so; but were you returning to Outfit City?"

"Yes, sir, I was going back to have a talk with you."

"That must mean that you have made some discovery of importance, as your intention was to push on and meet the Californians."

"I made several discoveries, all important, I think, Captain Winter."

"Out with them, Cody, and let me in if I can help you."

"First, sir, I was held up myself by the Mounted Sports, as I believed, but a search on my return revealed that Captain Coolhand clearly did the work alone. I was completely taken in," and Buffalo Bill smiled, while the boss said:

"With a rifle covering his heart, Cody, a man is not to be blamed for obeying orders."

CHAPTER XIV.

UNLOOKED-FOR FOES.

"That is a very kind way of looking at it on your part, Captain Winter, but I confess I supposed there was more than one rifle leveled at me, or I would have been tempted to play a trump card also, in other words, to have taken chances!" Buffalo Bill said in answer to the response of the boss.

"I know your nature well, Bill, and am well aware that you must think the odds heavy against you to submit."

"But tell me of the affair."

"There is little to tell, sir, save that I was halted, told that a dozen rifles covered me, and warned that I was known to be here to hunt down the Mounted Sports, so must give up my intention or take the consequences."

"He spoke of his band as the Mounted Sharps, rather than Sports, as they are generally called, repeating his warning to me and then ordered me to ride on."

"I called to him several times, but no answer was given, so I did ride on, to soon after come under another adventure."

"Ah! another hold-up?"

"Not exactly, though it was a voluntary surrender on the part of the horseman I saw in the trail."

"You have heard of the negro at Faraway who was said to have robbed the paymaster, entered the quarters of the officers, took money and valuables, and then made his escape, killing the sentinel in doing so, and could not even be trailed?"

"Yes, he was called Darkie Dick the Black Burglar."

"That is the man, sir."

"I wish to tell you just what occurred, only I must swear you to perfect secrecy, as I allowed him to go free for a purpose."

"He gave a set-back to my trust in him by later holding up Left-Hand Larry's coach, but for all that, I am glad I allowed him to go free, for what he did tell me."

"Why, Larry had a small fortune along with him," excitedly said Loyd Winter.

"All safe, sir, for I happened along before the coach was robbed, and to get where he did, the Black Burglar must have gone by some secret trail from where I met him," and Buffalo Bill told the story of his meeting with the negro, and how he had told him that the Mounted Sharps knew of the coming of the Californians.

Loyd Winter, called by courtesy "Captain," looked considerably troubled at what he heard, and said:

"It goes to prove, Cody, that my suspicion is right, that spies are very close to me and to the other agents of the company to get the information the out-

laws do of what is going over the trail; but you have said you would solve the mystery, and find out the culprits, and I feel much relieved for the future."

"I feel that they can be unearthed, sir; but I have something else to tell you."

"Did you see Lieutenant Keyes when he passed through Outfit City?"

"Yes, he had an early supper with me, intending to push right on to the fort."

"Well, he has the money Larry carried, and also what the two young men had, for I turned it over to him, and, as he goes over the trail, he will be on hand to protect the coach."

"That is fortunate, indeed."

"On my way back I took a look for tracks at the spot where I was held up, and found there only the trail of one horse, and that showed me that Captain Coolhand was alone, or his men, if he had any, were on foot."

"I decided to ride back to Outfit City and acquaint you with all that had happened, and then push on again over the trail, which I will now do with all haste, as I am anxious to head off the California coach, now that you know it is coming, and at what time."

"Yes, that is all there is to do, Cody; but how is your horse?"

"Have you a good one that I can exchange with, as mine has been pushed a little hard."

"Get what you wish at the relay stations, for I will write you an order to that effect, as some of the stock-tenders may not know you."

"Thank you, sir."

The order was written, and after a few words more, Captain Winter turned and started back to Outfit City, while Buffalo Bill put his horse in a canter and went back over the trail to meet the California coach and save it from the outlaws, whom he now knew would be on the watch for its coming, and be prepared to hold it up.

Night soon settled down dark and gloomy, but unerringly he kept the trail, and mile after mile was cast behind him.

Coming to a stage relay station, he called up the stocktender, showed his order from the boss, and was given a fresh mount, and a fine animal it was, too.

In a sweeping gallop he went on his way then, with no thought of being again disturbed, as the coach having passed some time before, he saw no reason for the outlaws to be lying in wait, and it really gave him a start to hear the loud command:

"Halt!"

"Hands up or take the consequences!"

Realizing how much depended upon him did he expect to save the Californians, Buffalo Bill upon sudden impulse, decided to risk running the gantlet of whatever danger threatened him.

CHAPTER XV.

THE COURTEOUS OUTLAW.

Buffalo Bill was too well accustomed to sudden dangers to be caught off his guard, and at the very first words of the threatening command to halt, he made up his mind to risk a dash in the darkness and try to push through.

Were he captured, he well knew that the California coach would come along the trail unchecked, and run into that very ambush of outlaws.

The regular coach, too, ahead of the extra some couple of hours, would also be held up, and that would mean robbery perhaps to the driver or some of his passengers.

Buffalo Bill therefore realized all that depended upon him, and, dropping upon one side of his horse, opposite from whence the voice had come, and whipping out his revolver and firing at random in the darkness, he drove the spurs into his horse and dashed forward.

He saw flashes mingling with those of his revolver, he heard shots and the whistle of bullets, felt his horse give a

mighty bound, and then go down in a heap, rolling over him.

Then he felt all was a blank and blackness before him.

But the sensation of unconsciousness could not have been but momentary to him, for he attempted to rise, to drag himself from beneath the weight of his dead horse, realizing as he did so that he was not seriously hurt.

But suddenly he beheld a form bending over him, and a revolver's cold muzzle touched his forehead, while he heard the stern words:

"Resist, and you are a dead man!"

His revolver had fallen from his hand, and realizing that he was at the mercy of the speaker, he said:

"You win the game, pard, and I pass."

"Who are you?"

"My pards call me Buffalo Bill."

"Ah!"

The name was evidently a surprise to the man.

He really appeared startled.

"Buffalo Bill, the scout?" he said in a low tone.

"Yes."

"Where were you going?"

"To the fort."

"Where are you from just now?

"Outfit City."

"What was your errand there?"

"That's my business, not yours."

"Why did you try to run the gantlet of my men?"

"I've often run a worse gantlet."

"You risked your life."

"I often do."

"Your horse is dead."

"Had he not fallen, I'd have gotten through."

"Are you hurt?"

"None to speak of."

"I have no personal quarrel with you, Buffalo Bill, so will allow you to go on your way."

"Thanks."

"Now tell me who you are that is patrolling this Overland trail, and firing upon a Government officer?"

"I am one of the band who call themselves Mounted Sharps, Sports, or whatever other name you care to give them."

"I thought so: but why do you allow me to go free, for I certainly have a quarrel with you, and might not be so merciful did I catch you?"

"That is my business."

"Ah!"

"And where are your men?"

"Within twenty feet of you."

"Many of them?"

"Too many even for the great Buffalo Bill to attempt to resist."

"Introduce me."

The outlaw saw that the scout believed he was alone, and was meditating some bold game to spring upon him, so he said quickly:

"I have given you your freedom for reasons I cannot explain."

"Had I known who you were I would not have ordered my men to fire upon you."

"As they did, I am glad they did you no other harm than killing your horse."

"Now, take your saddle and bridle off your horse and go while you can."

"You are so good, I am emboldened to ask the loan of a horse."

"You couldn't oblige me, could you, for I'll return him?"

"You are about as cool a man as I ever met, Buffalo Bill."

"How do I compare with Captain Coolhand?"

"Not at all, for you are an honest man, he accused with crime," and there was bitterness in the strange response to the scout's question.

"Thanks again."

"But about the loan of a horse?"

"Get one at the next stage relay station."

"It is twenty miles from here."

"Not much of a walk to such a man as you are."

"Now go while you can."

"Then there is a string attached to my going, eh?"

"The men now with me are my especial band; but others will soon be here, led by Captain Coolhand, and he may be less lenient than I, while his men certainly will, regarding you as their particular foe."

"I think I had better go," said the scout dryly, and he added:

"I thank you, certainly, for the favor shown me."

"May I ask your name?"

"No; I am a mere nobody; but go."

The scout was again struck by the reply, but quickly drew his saddle and bridle from his dead horse, felt around for his pistol, picked it up, and said:

"Some day we may become better acquainted."

"Good-night."

The outlaw still covered him with his revolver, muttered a good-night, and saw him walk away in the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI.

GETTING A MOUNT.

"Well, I am not the one to hoof it twenty miles when there is a chance to get a horse, and so much depending just now on my making good time."

"That outlaw was a gentleman, in his way, and did not even borrow my spare change, and it doesn't seem just right to rob him of a horse; but then he shot mine, and it will simply be an exchange and no questions asked."

"I'll try it on at any rate."

So mused Buffalo Bill, as he halted in the trail a few hundred yards from where he had so nearly lost his life.

He had his saddle, bridle, and traps on his back, and, having decided to take the risk of getting a mount from the outlaws, he placed them down by the side of the road, marked the place well in his mind, and then disappeared in the timber on the left.

His intention was to find out just where the outlaws had their horses, while lying in ambush, and to cut an animal out if he could.

He also wished to discover how many outlaws there were at that point.

His nameless captor, a mere "nobody," as he had said himself, had told him that Captain Coolhand was expected along soon with other men.

This, then, must be the place where the California coach was to be held up.

If so, it would be hours before the regular coach would be along, and it, too, carried a treasure, Buffalo Bill decided to have the driver, whom he knew well, to intrust it to him, to carry around the point of danger by the secret trail he intended to lead the California coach.

By doing this the Mounted Sharps would get nothing by holding up the regular coach, while they would wait in vain for the coming of the Californians, who would, guided by the scout, give them the slip.

But the first thing to do was to get a mount.

Pushing his way through the timber, as noiselessly as an Indian, and as unerringly, to come up in the rear of the outlaws' place of ambush, by a wide flank movement Buffalo Bill approached the trail, and halted when he knew he could not be more than several hundred yards from it.

He had come to an open spot in the timber, where there was a bit of meadowland, and beyond the land rose toward the ridge along which ran the stage trail.

Listening attentively, Buffalo Bill heard sounds ahead of him.

Crouching down, he kept silent for a few minutes.

Then he muttered: "Their horses are in the open, between me and the hill."

"If there is no guard over them, I will be all right."

"If they are guarded, I must have an animal, anyhow."

Having come to this bold resolve, Buffalo Bill scouted around in the edge of the timber until he came to the base of the slope.

There he beheld the horses staked out to feed.

Creeping as near as he dared, without being more certain of his ground, he was enabled to see that there were eight or ten animals at least.

"It was lucky I made no break when the idea took possession of me that that fellow was all alone."

"I kept myself out of trouble that time—perhaps out of the grave."

"Now, I wonder if there is a guard over those horses."

"There is one animal a little apart from the others, and I'll see if I can reach him, and what he is like, for I must have the best."

Creeping up to the horse he found him staked out by a short rope, and a dark object on the ground near showed where his saddle and bridle lay.

The animal slightly started at his approach, but a low word soothed him, and as he greeted the horse affectionately he muttered:

"This one is good enough for me."

"I'll take him."

"I do not think there is a guard here, and I could stampede the whole corral."

"But I won't."

"I'll just let them think this horse got his rope pin up and strayed off."

So saying, the scout drew up the pin, and, allowing it to drag through the grass, led the horse toward the timber.

The horses all looked up as their comrade was seen moving off, and one gave a low whinny as though to ask the reason.

But Buffalo Bill held his hand hard on the nostrils of his captive and allowed no answering neigh.

Soon the shelter of the timber was reached, and, going slowly and as noiselessly as possible, he led the horse out into the trail at the point where he had left his saddle and bridle.

They were still there, and quickly the scout saddled up and mounted.

"A little behind time, but still on the trail," he muttered in a grim tone as he settled himself firmly in the saddle and started his horse at a canter as soon as he felt that he was out of earshot of the ambushed outlaws.

CHAPTER XVII.

LARRY TELLS HIS STORY.

Buffalo Bill felt highly elated over his success in securing a mount.

And the animal was a good one—a horse to be proud of.

He was easy-gaited, willing, full of spirit, and went along as though he was possessed of great endurance.

The scout quite forgot his hard fall, stunning shock, and the few bruises and cut or two he had received when his horse went down dead under him.

Several times as he rode along in a swinging gallop he congratulated himself upon not having made the mistake that the outlaw who had held him up was all alone.

"I am lucky as usual," he muttered.

His desire was to overtake the coach of Left-Hand Larry and hoped to soon after meet the regular on its way to Outfit City.

This, he had been told by Captain Winter, was driven by Nebraska Ned, a man whom he well knew, and who had been pony rider and scout before he took to driving stage.

Captain Winter had also told him that the California coach would doubtless have Lige Lumley on the box for the run from Death-Trap Canyon to Outfit City, and this driver the scout also knew well, so anticipated no trouble in having him obey his orders to follow him off of the stage trail.

The relay station, which Buffalo Bill had feared he would have to walk to, was reached in good time, but, as his horse seemed perfectly fresh and improved steadily on acquaintance, he determined to make no change, but to stick to him.

So he passed the station without halting or making himself known.

His horse kept up the same untiring pace, and he was dashing swiftly along,

when in an open space at the top of a rise he saw the coach ahead of him.

"I have either ridden faster than I thought, or Larry has had a mishap, for I did not expect to overtake him for some miles yet," said the scout.

Another moment he drew rein by the side of the coach as Left-Hand Larry called out to him that he "was the very man he wanted to see."

"Well, Larry, here I am; but has anything gone wrong?"

"Yes, everything."

"Where are the two gentlemen passengers?"

"Gone."

"Ah!"

"And the prisoner?"

"Also gone."

"Then you have been again held up?" said the scout anxiously.

"Pard Bill, it is wuss than that."

"Have they been killed?"

"No, but the road-agents has got 'em."

"All three?"

"Sure."

"Where was this, Larry?"

"Back from here a mile."

"Strange they did not hold you up, pard."

"A mile back?"

"Yes."

"By a group of bowlders, with heavy timber beyond?"

"That's their place."

"I heard a sound in the timber as I came by, but supposed it was a pack of coyotes or deer frightened at my coming."

"They was two-legged coyotes, Bill, and the worst kind of 'em."

"Tell me just what happened, Larry, for it distresses me to learn that these two young men have been captured, as the colonel will feel it greatly, for they were his guests, you know."

"It couldn't be helped, Pard Bill."

"It was Captain Coolhand himself did the work, and yer know it don't do to trifile with him, so as he said he wanted them young tenderfeet I chipped in my advice for them ter go along, though they was game and wanted ter fight it out."

"I know'd what that meant, so I says no, and Cap'n Coolhand he just took 'em with him!"

"And released the prisoner, Nick Ross?"

"You bet he didn't."

"Did he escape from you?"

"Pard Bill, yer heard me say that I spect next time it would be a Chinaman, arter ther nigger had held me up?"

"Yes."

"Well, it were a Chinaman," and Larry uttered the words in a way that showed he well knew the surprise he was springing upon the scout.

"Do you mean that you were held up by a Chinaman road-agent, Larry?"

"That's what I mean."

"And he it was who released the prisoner?"

"His coming did, fer ther prisoner released himself."

"I'll tell yer jist how it all happened."

And he told the scout the whole story.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT BUFFALO BILL HEARD.

It was with the deepest interest that Buffalo Bill listened to the driver's story of his adventure with the Chinese road-agent.

He did not ask a single question until Larry had ended his recital, and then he said:

"Well, Larry, this has been a run you will not soon forget it."

"You bet I won't."

"Lieutenant Keyes put the Chinaman to flight?"

"In great shape."

"The heathen was game enough until the soldiers came, and then he went off like the devil were chasin' him close."

"And the lieutenant carried the money on to the fort?"

"Yes, pard."

"The Chinaman got nothing?"

"Only a scare."

"Are you sure it was a Chinaman?"

"He were from way back."

"He wasn't playin' no game of heathen, and ef he had a trump keerd up his sleeve ther lieutenant didn't give him a chance ter play it."

"And Nick Ross went with him?"

"If that prisoner were Nick Ross he did."

"That is, he lighted out quick on foot, while the Chinaman scooted on top o' his horse, and I were in hopes he'd tumble off, only he didn't."

"And the prisoner still had his irons on?"

"Yes, fer I had ther key yer gave me."

"Well, I am sorry he escaped, but we may get a grip on him again some day."

"Maybe."

"I am surprised that you have been held up by both a negro and a Chinese road-agent, and Captain Coolhand as well, and regret exceedingly that the two young men were captured."

"So does I; but ther money is safe."

"I wish that they were."

"But Coolhand's motive in kidnapping them is to get ransom, of course."

"Jist so."

"Now, I have to push on, Larry, so will leave you to come along at your ease, for they can't rob you now."

"Not much."

"They can't git blood out of a turnip, I has heerd, but I owes it to you, Pard Bill, that they didn't git ther money they came fer."

"That is all safe."

"Does yer not make out that them Mounted Sports has got more information than is right they should have of what the company carries over the Overland, unless there do be spies in its service ter give secrets away?"

"Sh— Larry, do not suggest such a thing to any one, for if there are spies, and they know they are suspected, there will be no catching them."

"That's so, and I'll keep dark, Pard Bill."

"You ought to meet Nebraska Ned's coach within the next hour, should you not?"

"Yes, pard, but I'm behind ter-night, and won't reach ther fort before day-break, so report my coming, please, ef I hain't kilt on ther way."

"All right, Larry."

"Good-night, and I hope you will have no more trouble."

"I hope so."

"Good-night, Pard Bill."

Buffalo Bill again rode on at a canter, while Larry followed more leisurely, feeling much better now that he had told his story to the scout, and he knew of the escape of his prisoner and the capture of his passengers.

Continuing on his way, Buffalo Bill's thoughts were busy.

He was reviewing the incidents of the afternoon and night.

Leaving Outfit City at noon, he had first been held up by Captain Coolhand himself, then had met the Black Burglar under most remarkable circumstances, had next come upon the coach, received the large amount of money it carried, in turn had given it into the keeping of Lieutenant Keyes, and then had followed his meeting with Loyd Winter, learned the tidings of the California coach being on the trail near, and returning to its rescue had had his horse shot, been made a prisoner by a road-agent, released, then secured for himself a mount on one of the outlaws' horses, and, overtaking Larry's coach, news had been told him that he greatly regretted, in the capture of the two young men and the escape of the prisoner.

"Well, this has been a checkered trail and no mistake, since I left Outfit City and took upon myself the duty of running down the Mounted Sports, an undertaking that Loyd Winter appeared to think so impossible, that he looked upon my promise to do so as a mere bluff."

"But I will show him yet that I am not bluffing, but in deadly earnest from start to finish."

"Now I must soon meet the regular coach, and before I come to the extra that follows, it will have passed the trail by which I intend to guide it around the Overland to Outfit City; but I can turn it back, and be well on my way along the valley trail when dawn comes—ah! I hear the rumble of the coach wheels now, and it has stopped!

"By Jupiter's ghost! it is held up, for I hear voices!" and Buffalo Bill drew rein and listened.

CHAPTER XIX.

BUFFALO BILL'S BLUFF.

Listening attentively for a moment, Buffalo Bill took in the situation in the trail ahead of him with the quickness of one who was trained to think and act on the impulse of the moment.

It was starlight, yet there was scattering timber along the trail which cast shadows here and there.

Attuned to hear the slightest sound, the scout had heard the rumble of the coach wheels, then the silence that followed a halt, voices, and he knew that in that lone place it could mean but one thing.

It was a hold-up of the coach by road-agents.

Knowing that the California extra was coming through, as they did, the outlaws seemed to have patrolled many miles of the trail, determined that it should not escape them.

Nearly all the way from Outfit City to Death-Trap Canyon the trail ran through a country that was a perfect paradise for outlawry, for men could so readily escape, either mounted or on foot.

The fort was some ten miles off the regular trail, but the coaches went out of their way, when occasion demanded, to visit it.

But its very location, and the fact that the soldiers had all they could do to guard the country beyond from hostile redskins, rendered the outlaws bolder.

Then, too, they were supposed to be in large force, their numbers being put anywhere from twenty to forty men, and being splendidly mounted, thoroughly armed, led by a clever, daring leader, knowing every deer trail and mountain fastness as they did, they could put at defiance any force sent after them that was less than a couple of hundred men.

Of course, the commandant of the fort did all in his power to protect the Overland Trail, to guard against the coaches and pony riders being held up by the outlaws; but to patrol the trails for hundreds of miles would have demanded a regiment or more, and then it could not have been successfully done.

Feeling that the Mounted Sports were stretched all along the trail, Buffalo Bill reasoned that those who had now held up Nebraska Ned's coach were necessarily few in number, and so he determined to alone take the chances of driving them off from their game.

So he gathered his reins well in hand, drew a revolver and called out suddenly:

"Forward men!

"The outlaws have halted the coach!"

The deep tones of the scout echoed through the timber, and then came the command:

"Lieutenant, throw flankers out and corral them."

"We will keep to the trail!"

As he uttered the last words Buffalo Bill began to advance rapidly up the trail, rattling his canteen against his revolver, and making all the noise he could to impress the outlaws with the idea that he had considerable force.

Several times he issued orders to imaginary foes, and yet when he came within sight of the coach, halted in the trail, there was but one to give battle to whatever foes he might have to encounter.

But he was ready to face all odds, and reined up alongside the coach prepared for a death struggle.

"Ho, Nebraska Ned, is that you?"

"It's me."

"And I'm that tickled I'm almost a fallin' off my seat—what! it's you, Buffalo Bill?" answered Nebraska Ned.

"Yes, Ned, and you were held up?"

"You bet I was."

"Yer come with ther soldiers just in time to save us."

"But whar is they?"

"Who?"

"The soldiers."

"In my mind."

"Does you mean they didn't come?"

"Yes, I am alone."

"And you made all that racket a coming?"

"My horse and I."

"Why, yer scared ther road-agents crazy."

"They went off at the first sound of yer voice, and they went in a hurry, too."

"I am glad of it."

"But how many were there?"

"I seen but one."

"Mounted, of course?"

"Yes, and, Pard Bill, I has got to tell you that the one I saw was a nigger."

"A negro?"

"Yes, or he were a white man blackened up; but then he had the talk of a nigger."

"What did he say?"

"First he halted me, and then he told me he'd make a pepper box of the old coach if there was a show of resistance."

"I told him there was only me and a lady along, and he'd get neither lead, steel nor gold."

"But he said he knew that there was plenty of gold along, and he'd take care as to who gave out the lead and steel."

"Just then your voice sounded out as clear as Gabriel's trumpet at Judgment Day, and he made himself scarce so sudden I hardly seen him go."

"Well, Ned, I am glad you came through all right; but have you any riches along?"

"I have, sir," said a voice strangely soft and musical, and a face looked out of the coach window.

CHAPTER XX.

A FAIR PASSENGER.

The voice and the words uttered at once turned the attention of Buffalo Bill upon the speaker.

Ever as courteous as a cavalier, he doffed his sombrero, and riding up to the side of the coach sat upon his horse with uncovered head, while he said:

"I am sorry, miss, that you have met with an alarm."

"Are you traveling alone, may I ask?"

"Yes, sir."

"But I do not mind the alarm, as long as I saved my money."

"Yes, that is fortunate."

"And to you I am grateful for it, as your daring rush to the rescue, though alone, for I heard your conversation with the driver, was what saved us."

"I was coming along the trail, heard Nebraska Ned halted, so it was my duty to help him out."

"And you nobly did so, sir, and if you bear the name by which the driver called you, I can understand your brave act, as I have heard much of Buffalo Bill, the famous scout."

Buffalo Bill bowed low at the compliment, but was silent.

The voice of the passenger was very winning, and he decided that she must be a young girl, and lovely.

Some officer's daughter, he decided, and yet he could not place her, so asked:

"May I inquire if you are from the fort, and I fail to recognize you?"

"Oh, no."

But she did not say who she was or where from, so the scout asked:

"Then we have not met before, miss?"

"Never, though I trust we may meet again, when I can more befittingly thank you for all you have done for me."

"Have you much money with you?"

The reply fairly startled the scout, and

Nebraska Ned as well, the latter giving a whistle.

"Yes, sir; I have fifty thousand dollars in bills, and diamonds and other jewels of equally that value."

"Then I must say, miss, you have taken desperate chances in bringing such a fortune over this trail."

"It could not be avoided, sir."

"But do you think the coach is likely to be held up again?"

"I am sure that it will."

"Oh, what shall I do?"

"I do not care to alarm you, miss, but the west-bound, coming some miles back, has been held up three times to-night, and more, two gentlemen, on their way to visit Colonel Duncan at the fort, were taken prisoners by the outlaws."

"Your coach is likely to be held up a number of times, as there is a special reason for the action of the outlaws just now."

The passenger listened in silence, as also did Nebraska Ned, and then she said:

"May I ask a great favor of you, sir?"

"Any service I can render, miss, it will be my pleasure, I assure you, to do."

"Thank you."

"What is it I can serve you in, miss?"

"Will you take into your keeping the money and valuables I have, and hold them until I can send for them, sir?"

"This is a large fortune to trust to any one's keeping, miss."

"I trust it to you, sir, with perfect confidence."

"Can you not await the coming up of Left-Hand Larry's coach, miss, and go back in it to the fort?"

"No, for I must continue on my way."

"Then you are not from the fort, so must be from Death-Trap Canyon?"

"No, I am simply passing through the country."

"Then you have been most fortunate to have gotten this far in safety with your fortune."

"Having done so, I do not care to lose all."

"It would be best for you to return and await until you can get an escort."

"At least until another run, for just now, as I said, the Mounted Sports are more active than usual."

"I cannot return, sir."

"I must go on."

"Then I will do as you wish, and take the money and valuables to the fort, turning them over to the paymaster, awaiting your order."

"Thank you, oh, thank you, sir!"

"But let me tell you that there is risk in my doing so, as I may also be held up."

"I shall take all chances, sir, holding you blameless if you are robbed."

"But I have such confidence in the power of Buffalo Bill to elude all traps set for him, I feel assured that my riches will be safe."

"Thank you for your good opinion."

"But may I ask your name?"

"It does not matter, as you never heard it before."

"But your order will have to come for this money and the jewels."

The girl was silent for a moment, and then said, as she drew a ring from her finger.

"Here, Mister Buffalo Bill, wear this, and when the order comes for the money and jewels, it will be accompanied by the counterpart of the ring I now give you."

The scout took the ring, and finding that it was too small for his finger, replied:

"I will keep the ring, miss, and will give up the treasure when I receive its counterpart."

CHAPTER XXI.

BUFFALO BILL "STRIKES IT RICH."

When the scout took the ring, he could not, of course, see it in the darkness, and he made no effort to do so, simply putting it away for safe keeping.

The lady passenger had turned to her traps in the coach, and from them she

took a package of what appeared to be well-filled envelopes.

Then she drew out a roll of buckskin neatly bound up.

Placing these two packages in a small satchel, she said:

"Here are my riches."

"Can you make the satchel fast to your saddle in some way, sir?"

"I will make it fast to myself, miss."

"I might be so hard pressed by a foe I would have to desert my horse."

"See, I will swing the satchel to my belt."

"And will you take the packages without knowing their contents?"

"You have told me."

"But you have not seen them."

"There is no need to do so."

"Suppose I were deceiving you?"

"How?"

"Not giving you to keep what I said there was?"

"Ah! but I'll trust you as to that, miss."

"You are very kind."

"I see no reason to doubt you."

"Still I will not be content without you seeing what the packages contain."

"I assure you there is no need to."

"But I shall insist."

"Mister Nebraska Ned, will you give me the benefit of your lantern, for I wish you to see also."

The driver brought the stage lantern, the young girl opened the satchel, unfolded the package of envelopes and revealed that each one contained new crisp bank bills, some of large denomination.

Then she opened the buckskin roll, and a quantity of gems were disclosed, with some rare old jewelry besides.

The gems glittered in the lantern light until Nebraska Ned said:

"Why, they just dazzles my eyes."

"You can see, sir, that I told you the truth."

"I never doubted it for an instant, miss."

Buffalo Bill tried hard, as Nebraska Ned also did, to get a glance at the fair passenger's face by the light of the lantern.

But, either intentionally or through accident, she kept in the shadow, and they were not able to see her.

"Now, sir, I intrust my riches to your keeping, and I no longer fear a hold-up by road-agents, for I have very little of value left, and only a small sum of money."

"I certainly thank you for your great kindness, sir."

"And I certainly appreciate your great trust in me, miss, a stranger."

"You are not a stranger."

"Indeed!"

"You are Buffalo Bill."

There was a world of meaning in the manner in which she uttered the words, and the scout raised his hat and bowed low, making no reply.

"Now, sir, good-night, for I can see that you are anxious to go on your way," and she extended a small, gloved hand.

"I am anxious to go on, as I have an important work on hand."

"Good-night, and good fortune attend you, miss."

"Good-night, Nebraska Ned."

"Jist one minute, Pard Bill."

"Well?"

"What yer has said scares me, and I intends ter make yer banker for what I has got, too."

"Then you carry a rich freight, eh?"

"I carries two bags putty heavy with dust, that they give me at Death-Trap Canyon, to put through; but they'd rather have it go slow than not git there, and so I turns it over to you, Pard Bill, to keep until it's safe to carry it."

"I'll hide it away, somewhere."

"You can pick it up on another run, Ned."

"That's what I wants," was the answer.

The bags were handed out from their hiding places, and tying them together Buffalo Bill hung them across his saddle.

Then he again said good-night; expressed a wish that the coach would go through all right, and rode away.

The coach rolled on, and looking back at it, Buffalo Bill muttered:

"Now, that was the richest load I ever saw a coach carry over this trail."

"And I've got the whole outfit."

"It would have been a great game for my counterpart, Shadow Bill, to have played Buffalo Bill and gotten possession of the whole lot."

"What a bonanza he would have struck."

"It is in order now for some road-agent who knows his business to hold me up."

"Now I know the very place to hide this gold dust, and I'll put it there, for it is cumbersome to carry."

"Come, old horse, we must get ahead, for there is another halt to hide this gold, and then we have got to rush for it to head off the California coach."

"My! but what a sweet voice that girl had."

"I'll bet big money she is beautiful," and the scout urged his horse into a rapid gallop.

CHAPTER XXII.

A MYSTERY OF LONE SAM'S CABIN.

Buffalo Bill did not ride very far, after leaving Nebraska Ned's coach, before he turned off of the stage trail.

He seemed to know just what he was about, and to be thoroughly acquainted with the country, for even in the darkness he did not hesitate as to what course he should pursue.

After riding a couple of hundred yards off the Overland trail he halted, dismounted, hitched his horse, and swinging the two stout gold bags over his shoulder continued on his way afoot.

He had not gone very far before he came to a massive group of rocks.

They were scattered about and piled up in all kinds of shapes.

Among them he disappeared, to reappear within a few minutes and without the gold bags.

Then he rapidly retraced his way to his horse, mounted and rode on his way once more.

Mile after mile he left behind him, keeping his horse at a swift and steady pace, until at last he drew down to a walk and muttered:

"The California coach is more than two hours behind Nebraska Ned, that is certain."

But he continued on until he came to the last relay station before the trail to Fort Faraway branched off from the Overland.

The stock-tender was not asleep, for he had given Nebraska Ned his relay team, and was awaiting the coming of Left-Hand Larry.

"Ho, Lone Sam, you are awake, I see," called out the scout as the stock-tender came out of his cabin as he heard hoofs.

"Oh, yes; I'm on deck; but it's you, is it, Pard Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes."

"I thought it was Left-Hand Larry's coach, for he's behind to-night!"

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes, he will not be along for an hour yet."

"Got into trouble?"

"Yes, he was held up and some of his passengers were taken."

"That was bad."

"Did you see Lieutenant Keyes pass?"

"Long ago, pard."

"He's at the fort by this time."

"And Nebraska Ned?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you meet him?"

"I did, ten miles back."

"I say, Pard Bill, who was that pretty girl?"

"He had a lady passenger, but I did not see whether she was young or old, pretty or ugly."

"I did."

"You saw her then?"

"Pard Bill, do you know who she is?"

"I do not."

"Well, it's strange about her."

"Why so?"

"She came to this cabin on horseback."

"Indeed?"

"So she did."

"It was night, and I was inside getting supper, as Nebraska Ned generally has a bite with me, when I heard horses dash up."

"I thought it was soon for Ned, and as Lieutenant Keyes had shortly before passed, I went out to see if he had come back."

"Well?"

"Going out of the bright light into the darkness, I couldn't see well at first, but heard a man's voice and then hoofs going off."

"I was just going to call out to ask who it was, when suddenly there appeared before me a woman."

"Ah!"

"There she was, right where the fire-light from the door fell upon her, and she had a small satchel in her hand, a cloak thrown across her arm, and a revolver in a holster at her belt."

"She was dressed in a dark riding habit, and had on a slouch hat with a large black plume, and I tell you she was a beauty."

"Who was she?"

"I don't know."

"Where did she come from?"

"I don't know."

"Where is she?"

"She went with Nebraska Ned in his coach eastward."

"It was the lady I saw with him."

"Yes."

"And you know nothing about her?"

"Not a thing."

"Strange."

"So it is."

"Did you not ask her any questions?"

"I thought she was the wife or daughter of some officer at the fort, though I didn't recognize her as any one I'd seen before, and I tell you, Pard Bill, with all the pretty ladies at the fort there is not one to compare with her in beauty."

"Didn't you ask her who she was?"

"I was that upset I did not; in fact, did not dare to."

"What did she say?"

"She asked me if she was in time to head off Nebraska Ned's coach from the fort, and I told her he would soon be along, and asked her into the cabin."

"She said she preferred to remain outside, said I must not mind her, but go on with my cooking, or I would burn my supper, and I did so, while there she sat until Ned came along."

"And so went with him?"

"Yes."

"Was he expecting her to meet him there?"

"No."

"Strange," and Buffalo Bill was certainly puzzled.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SCOUT IN A QUANDARY.

After a moment of thought and beyond doubt greatly puzzled by what Lone Sam had told him of the mysterious lady passenger Buffalo Bill asked:

"Did Nebraska Ned know nothing about her?"

"Not a word, as far as I could find out."

"Did you not ask him?"

"That's just it, I couldn't."

"He did not get his supper, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"But the lady came and stood in the door while he ate, and we had not a chance for a word."

"It would seem as though she did not wish you to talk together?"

"So it looked."

"Did Ned not make the run in to the fort to-night?"

"Yes."

"I remember now that he told me he did, but you know he does not always do so."

"No, not unless he finds the signal at the turn-off calling him in."

"Well, just where that lady came from I cannot guess, unless—"

"Unless what, Pard Bill?"

"She came from some of the ranches nearly a hundred miles north of here."

"She could come from nowhere else, for had she been at the fort Ned would have picked her up there."

"She is not from the fort, Sam."

"Then she comes from one of the ranches."

"That is it."

"You say some one came with her."

"Yes."

"I heard a man's voice, but he rode off before I saw him."

"And left her here?"

"Yes."

"And she knew about Nebraska Ned's coach?"

"Yes."

"And she took out a well-filled purse and paid him for her passage."

"To what point?"

"To Outfit City."

"Then something must be known of her there."

"The boss will doubtless know."

"Yes."

"But she is a mystery, Sam."

"But have you seen or heard of any road-agents on the trail?"

"Not one."

"No one passing along on horseback?"

"Not for days."

"No extras going over the run?"

"None."

"Nor any reported?"

"No."

It was evident that Lone Sam, the stock-tender, had not been told anything about the coming of the California coach.

If it came, all he would have to do would be to give the driver of it a team of fresh horses.

But it was then time that the California coach should be along; in fact, if not following further behind the regular than reported, it was already overdue.

But Buffalo Bill was willing to halt there for a short rest, as the extra coach must have fresh horses, especially as by the trail he would guide it there would be no relay before reaching Outfit City.

It would be a long drive around, but the trail was fairly good, there was no hurry, and time was nothing if the California coach flanked the road-agents in safety.

The scout also wanted a fresh mount himself, and not having had anything to eat since leaving Outfit City, he decided to have supper at Lone Sam's cabin and not have to halt to cook his own meal on the road.

He was anxious to get the California coach as far away from danger by dawn as he could.

If the Mounted Sports found the coach did not come, they would wait for some hours to give it time, and then go to look it up.

Then they would see the trail where it had branched off, and knowing the country as they did, they would feel that it would reach Outfit City, with the start it had, before they could overtake it, while, to head it off the way it had taken they would have to go right through the headquarters camp and meet it.

With a few hours' start then, by brisk driving, Buffalo Bill felt that he could lead the Californians safely into Outfit City, and from there on it could be out of danger of the Mounted Sports.

So he had his supper, got a fresh horse, and a good one, and then began to grow anxious as the coach did not appear.

At last he decided to ride on and meet it.

He was anxious to find out what the matter was, and so bidding Lone Sam good-night, but saying nothing of the extra coach, he mounted his horse and rode on his way.

In a few miles he came to where the trail turned off, where he intended to guide the coach.

Surely it had not gone that way.

Further on he came to the trail, ten miles distant from that point lying the fort.

He did wish that he could make a dash up there and leave the fortune he had with him, and belonging to Nebraska Ned's mysterious lady passenger.

But he dared not leave the trail, for fear the coach would go by.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BUFFALO BILL HEARS STARTLING NEWS.

Keeping on the trail, Buffalo Bill grew more and more anxious regarding the California coach.

It certainly was hours behind the regular.

That the road-agents had not held it up seemed certain, for they were evidently located along the Overland between Lone Sam's cabin and Outfit City.

If they had held it up even beyond, the coach should have come along after having been robbed.

At last Buffalo Bill came to a halt.

The coach could not pass him if he did not turn off the trail.

The fortune he carried was a source of great anxiety and worry to him.

He would get rid of that, and have his mind clear to devote all his care to the Californians and their treasure.

So he turned back on the trail and kept up a brisk pace until he got to the branch-off to Fort Faraway.

Then he halted, staked his horse out and sat down upon a rock to await the coming of Left-Hand Larry.

He knew that Larry must be along in a short while, for there was nothing more for the road-agents to get from him.

He had waited half an hour perhaps, when he heard the rumble of wheels.

At first the sound seemed to come from the westward, and he hoped that it was the extra coach.

But soon his ears caught the sound aright and he muttered:

"It is Larry's coach.

"He has got a fresh team from Lone Sam and is making up for lost time."

Soon after the coach came into view through the darkness, and Larry was driving at a surprising pace.

"Ho, Larry!"

The driver's foot went hard down upon the brake, the reins were tugged at with a strong pull, and as the team came to a halt Larry called out in no amiable tone:

"Now, what ther devil is your racket, fer I hain't got enough about me ter bury a nigger half decent."

"Come, sing out, fer I is gittin' tired o' this nonsense, and I'll let go my gun."

"Don't be cross, Larry, for I don't intend to rob you."

"Buffalo Bill!"

"Yes."

"Thank the Lord!"

"Anything else gone wrong?"

"Yas; yer met Nebraska Ned?"

"I did."

"What has happened?"

"Did you see a lady passenger he had along?"

"Yes."

"Picked her up at Lone Sam's cabin, he said?"

"Yes."

"Then he wasn't lyin'."

"Not if he told you he had a lady passenger; but did you not see her?"

"I did not?"

"Why not?"

"She wasn't there."

"Where?"

"In ther buss."

"Do you mean it?"

"I does."

"Might she not have been asleep?"

"She wasn't."

"Did you look in the coach?"

"You bet."

"And she was not there?"

"She wasn't."

"What did Ned say?"

"Damn and damn."

"I don't wonder."

"But how did he account for her not being there?"

"He didn't account for it."

"Why?"

"He thought he had 'em, and I thought ther same."

"But you says ther leddy were there?"

"She certainly was."

"And Lone Sam says the same."

"Yes, she came to his cabin on hōrseback, and then went on in Nebraska Ned's coach, for I met them on ther trail."

"Well, she's gone."

"When did Ned know of her being in the coach last?"

"When he left you."

"And she mysteriously disappeared?"

"She did."

"Was the coach door closed?"

"It was."

"Did she leave nothing behind her?"

"No; for we looked with a lantern."

"When did Ned find she was gone?"

"When he met me."

"You halted for a word?"

"Yes, and he told me he had met you, and I told him how I had been held up fer keeps."

"Then he called out to his passenger, but she made no reply."

"My lantern shone right inter his buss, and I said nobody was thar."

"He jumped down and looked in, and ef he didn't turn like a corpse I never saw one."

"I tell yer, I felt sorry fer him, and then he told me all he knew about her."

"As I were coming along over the trail he asked me to look her up, and ter tell yer, when I c'u'd see yer."

"Then he drove on, and I made up my mind that Nebraska Ned hed ther monkies, and I tell yer it hit me hard."

"But I were told by Lone Sam that he were all right; that ther hed been a woman along, and you tells me ther same."

"Yes."

"But you saw no trace of her along the trail?"

"Nary trace, Pard Bill," was the melancholy response.

CHAPTER XXV.

TO BE A SECRET.

Buffalo Bill was very much surprised and more worried at what he had heard from Left-Hand Larry of the strange disappearance from the coach of Nebraska Ned's passenger.

Could it be, he wondered, that while she slept a road-agent, aware of what treasure she carried, had slipped into the coach as it was going slowly along, without attracting Ned's attention, and had in some way kidnapped her?

To do this he must have had chloroform, to render her unconscious, and even then it would be no easy matter for a man to take her out of the coach and not be seen by the driver.

Buffalo Bill had noticed that she did not appear to be of a tiny form, and it would take a very powerful man to bear her weight in his arms and step out of the moving coach.

"Larry?"

"Yes, Pard Bill?"

"Did you notice if the leather back of Ned's coach was slashed open with a knife?"

"We did."

"Had it been?"

"No, it was all right."

"This looks bad."

"It do, and for poor Ned."

"Why, he were most crazy."

"And you saw no trace of the woman's form on the trail?"

"No; but, yer see, I thought Ned had 'em, and wasn't lookin' close."

"But then ther horses would have shied had she been lyin' in ther trail, or near it."

"But they did not?"

"No."

"Both you and Ned have had a hard night of it."

"I hain't in it with Ned in trouble, fer my pilgrims were men."

"That is so."

"But what did Lone Sam say?"

"He were all broke up."

"I don't wonder, for I am, too."

"What yer goin' ter do about it, Pard Bill?"

"I hardly know what to say."

"I'm not wuth a cent in advisin' yer for I am all tuk aback."

But Buffalo Bill was a man who thought with lightning-like rapidity, and he quickly decided as to his course.

"Larry?"

"Sir to you, pard."

"I have a package I wish you to take to Colonel Duncan."

"Yes."

"I do not think you will be held up on the way between here and the fort; but if you are you can say you have been robbed of all you had, and your passengers kidnapped."

"I will."

"It is a satchel I wish you to take, and I shall pull the straw out of one of the leader's collars, and stuff it in the leather, sewing it up, and hiding it as well as I can."

"If it makes the shoulder of the horse sore I am sorry, but it cannot be helped, and these dispatches are valuable and must reach the colonel in safety."

"They shall, and its a dandy idee o' youn, Pard Bill, ter hide 'em as yer do, which, as ther coach is light, it won't hurt ther horse fer ther distance."

"All right."

"I'll write a note to the colonel also," and, taking a slip of paper from his notebook, and a pencil, Buffalo Bill wrote the note and placed it in the satchel.

This he wrapped around with a piece of his saddle blanket, and then, cutting into the horse collar, he drew out the straw and forced in the space the satchel.

With a harness needle and thread, which he never went without, he sewed up the opening, and then said:

"Now, Larry, I have told the colonel of this mysterious disappearance of Ned's passenger, and asked him not to let it be known, for I can the better track her if left to act my own way."

"Right you are; but Ned will tell it at Outfit City."

"I shall go to Lone Sam's cabin and start him in all haste after Ned, telling him to make it known only to Boss Winter."

"That's all right."

"And Sam must keep the secret, too, and I'll see just what can be done to find her."

"I does hope you kin."

"It war just after the Valley station I met Nebraska Ned, and, with the long mountain climb ahead of him, Lone Sam can catch him before he makes the twenty-five miles to the next relay."

"He must, and I'll lose no time in getting him started."

"Good-night, and I do hope that you will get in safe this run."

With this, Buffalo Bill threw himself upon his horse and set off in a rapid run for Lone Sam's cabin.

He was not long in reaching there, and he was glad to find the stock-tender up.

"I was that sorry about the young lady, Pard Bill, I couldn't turn in."

"So Larry told you, did he?"

"Yes, and you must lose no time in overtaking Nebraska Ned and telling him to let no one know of her disappearance save Captain Winter."

"I will await your return here."

In five minutes more Lone Sam was flying along in pursuit of Nebraska Ned.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NEBRASKA NED'S EXPERIENCE.

Having seen Lone Sam mounted upon a swift horse and off after Nebraska Ned, Buffalo Bill sat down to await the coming of the California coach, and the return of the stock-tender.

If the coach came along before Lone

Sam's return, he would simply give it a team of fresh horses and start, leaving a note for Lone Sam to say that an "extra" had arrived, and he had also had to go with it, leaving the impression that it had taken the trail back to the fort.

But Buffalo Bill had much to meditate over, in the happenings of the night, and he sat gazing into the smoldering fire with his mind busy.

He was pleased at the ingenious way he had gotten rid of the large treasure intrusted to his keeping, and felt that it at least was safe, as was also the gold that Nebraska Ned had turned over to him.

He had written to the colonel, and also sent a line for Lone Sam to give to Nebraska Ned, who was to take it to Captain Winter.

Having done his duty thus far, Buffalo Bill could only wait for the coming of the California coach, for there was nothing else that he could do.

In the mean time Nebraska Ned was driving along the trail, with the appearance of an utterly dejected man.

Every few minutes there would break from his lips the exclamation:

"My God! My God!"

"I am a ruined man!"

He seemed to go on his way mechanically, allowing his horses to take their own way.

As he ascended the long slope, which the trail wound up to the ridge, thus crossing the mountains where the outlaws held such an advantage, a voice sounded ahead in the darkness:

"Halt!"

"Hands up, Nebraska Ned!"

"All right! I've halted, so have your way, for you can't do me no harm now," was the meek response.

"It is not the custom of the Mounted Sharps to harm the drivers of the coaches at any time, unless they force us to give them a lesson," was the answer that came out of the darkness ahead.

"Well, have your say; but you'll get nothing from my coach this night."

"That remains to be seen."

"I'm not lying to you."

"I had a rich freight, but it was taken miles back."

"Do you mean this?" asked the voice quickly, for the man was not yet visible.

"I does."

"What did you have?"

"Two bags of the yellow."

"Yes; so far, right."

"But what else?"

"Well, there was a lady along."

"Yes; go on."

"She had dead boodles of wealth."

"I see."

"But what became of it?"

"It was taken, too."

"Ah! a rich haul indeed; but I would rather be sure of this, for you drivers are experts at lying."

"Well, go through the old hearse, and if you find anything of value yer is welcome to it as a gift from me," and Nebraska Ned felt joy at least that Buffalo Bill had the rich freight the coach had carried.

"Your two bags of gold I knew were to be along, and also that you have a lady passenger who carried a rich freight; but I will have a talk with her."

"I wish to God you could."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you blamed cutthroats has got her, too."

"What! Did they take her?"

"Look in the coach and you'll find her gone."

"Then you must have been held up after I got the word to halt."

"I don't know nothin' about what you got, but I does know ther boodle is all gone, and the leddy too."

"Was it Captain Coolhand himself?"

"I don't know you devils one from t'other."

"Were there more than one road-agent?"

"How many has you got with you?"

"Why?"

"If I thought you was alone I'd chance it, fer I feel like killin' somebody tonight, indeed I does."

"I'd feel better."

"Well, I warn you not to try it on me, for it would cause you to weigh several pounds more as a dead man than you do now, my men would pile you so full of lead."

"Show 'em up."

"Why?"

"Seein' is believin'."

"It is too dark for you to see; but I'll give you a hint that I am not alone."

"Let's have it," and Nebraska Ned was growing reckless under his trouble.

"Three of you men send a shot over that fool's head," came the stern command.

Instantly there were three flashes, all a dozen feet apart, and one of the bullets shivered the coach lamp to atoms.

"That's enough of that blamed nonsense now," growled Nebraska Ned, reining in his leaders, who were startled by the shots.

"Hearing is believing sometimes as well as seein'," said the road-agent leader with a laugh.

"Well, you take a peep in ther coach ter see that the leddy is gone, and s'arch ther outfit if yer feels like it, fer I wants ter git along."

The road-agent, as though no longer dreading to expose himself to Ned's fire, after revealing that he had comrades near, walked boldly toward the coach, threw open the door, and flashed the glare of a dark lantern within.

He saw that the coach was empty, and muttered: "Well, the captain got the lady and the freight."

With this he turned the light upon Nebraska Ned, blinding him momentarily with the glare.

As he did so there came a flash back down the trail, a report, and a bullet shattered the bull's-eye lantern held in the hand of the road-agent.

Then came the words:

"Now, pard, charge them hard!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

LONE SAM'S MISSION.

Whether the unexpected and well-aimed shot, fired back down the trail, shattered the hand of the road-agent or not, Nebraska Ned could not tell.

But he heard a cry as of pain, a curse, and the outlaw disappeared.

His eyes momentarily blinded by the intense glare of the bull's-eye lantern, Nebraska Ned did not see just which way the outlaw went.

But when he had checked his restive leaders he heard a sound in the timber as of men in rapid flight, though they seemed to have delayed a minute before running off, as though to ascertain the force of the rescue party.

Looking back down the trail, Nebraska Ned could see nothing in the darkness but he heard the rapid clatter of hoofs, and a moment after there dashed up to the coach a single horseman, a revolver in each hand, and he called out in loud tones:

"Which way did they go, Ned; for my men can catch them?"

The driver saw that there was but one man, that he had made a bold bluff to save him, but he carried out the idea that there were more, and replied in a loud tone:

"There on ther right, pard."

"Yer kin hear 'em a shoving lively." Then he said in a low tone:

"Why, Lone Sam, it's you?"

"Yes, pard."

"And all by your little lonesome?"

"All alone, Ned."

"How did yer do it?"

"I was trying to overtake you, heard the shots, halted, hitched my horse, crept up, got a glance of a bull's-eye light, aimed at it, and that is all."

"But I didn't kill my man?"

"Not unless he dies o' fright, from the way he lit out."

"But I'm obliged to you, Pard Sam, and you bet I'm yer friend fer yer game act this night, fer it were Buffalo Bill's way o' doing things."

"Maybe I caught it from him, for he sent me after you."

"Here I am; but I'm awful down, fer Left-Hand Larry has told yer about ther leddy?"

"Yes, and that brought Buffalo Bill back to my cabin to get me to come after you."

"Here I am."

"Here is a note he sent you, and he says you must not tell a stock-tender, or any one else except Captain Loyd Winter, that you had a lady passenger on the way and that she was kidnapped."

"I won't."

"He has his reasons, you know, and I'm always the man to yield when Buffalo Bill says the word."

"So am I."

Then, by the light of the remaining coach light, Nebraska Ned glanced at the note and said:

"This is fer Cap'n Winter."

"Yes; it tells him something the scout wished him to know, I believe; but he told me to push hard on after you, to catch you before you got to the next relay station, as he did not wish you to let any one know about the lady."

"I won't, Pard Sam."

"But hain't it awful?"

"I cannot account for her disappearance, Ned."

"Did you hear no sound in the coach?"

"Not a sound."

"And only missed her when you met Left-Hand Larry?"

"Only then."

"It is remarkable; but I am sure Buffalo Bill has determined to take the trail, and you bet he'll soon unearth the mystery of her leaving your coach and what has become of her."

"I hopes so. I believes so."

"And I'm glad I hain't got to tell yet, fer it gives me a chance to find out before all know that she disappeared while in my care."

"I tell you, Pard Sam, ther thought made me feel awful; but Buffalo Bill will find it out, I know he will."

"I believe it, too, Ned; but the road-agents didn't have time to rob you of much, did they?"

"They couldn't, if they'dhev had all night, fer I hain't got anything."

"I've been robbed of enough for one night."

"Indeed you have; but how many were in the band?"

"I think I can answer for there being four—maybe more."

"Well, I must be off, for Buffalo Bill will await my return at my cabin."

"I hope all will come out well, Ned; but, remember, the captain is the only man who must know about the lady."

"Yes, Sam."

"Good-night, and I won't forget yer."

With this Nebraska Ned drove on his way once more, feeling far more cheerful now that Buffalo Bill had taken up the trail of the fair passenger who had so mysteriously disappeared from his coach.

And back over the trail went Lone Sam, the stock-tender, allowing his horse to take a much slower pace than he had on the chase after the coach.

The dawn had not yet come when he rode up to his cabin, and to his surprise found that Buffalo Bill was not alone, for there were two others with him, and they were men who did not wear the garb of the frontier, but instead the dress of civilization.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THREE VISITORS.

Lone Sam was not one whom any one would have suspected of leading the life of a stock-tender on the Overland Trail.

He was a man of compactly built form,

fine face, some thirty years of age, and a manner and bearing that were courteous and not in the least spoiled by the rough life he was forced to lead.

That he had been well born and educated, had been reared amid refined surroundings, was evident.

And yet a year before he had come to his little cabin to attend stock for the Overland coaches.

He would have been allowed a comrade to aid him, and help in defending the stage horses, but he declined assistance, preferring to be alone, and so the name of Lone Sam was promptly given him by the drivers, who only knew that he had simply said that his name was Sam.

He had quickly built for himself a very comfortable cabin, had sent east for glass and put it in the windows, and his little home was as attractive and comfortable as any officer's quarters in the fort.

He had a number of books, some pictures, a guitar, sang well, and appeared to enjoy his lone life.

But his horses were always in the best condition, he lived well, the drivers all knowing where they could get a good meal; the man was popular with all, though a mystery on account of one of his capabilities being content to live such a life.

He was a dashing rider, a dead shot, could sketch well, and appeared content in his surroundings.

Twice he had been attacked by outlaws, and several times by prowling bands of Indians, seeking to run off his stock; but a group of graves back under the pines showed how deadly had been his aim, or brave his defense, and so Lone Sam the stock-tender had been left severely alone for the past few months.

Buffalo Bill had always liked the man, and felt that he was to be implicitly trusted, but he was a mystery to the scout as well as to others.

Looking over his pleasant cabin, after the stock-tender had gone to overtake Nebraska Ned, Buffalo Bill saw his books, his sketches, and other evidences of refined taste.

"I wonder what can have brought that man out here to lead a wild life," muttered the scout.

"Soldiers are brought here in the discharge of duty, and, as for myself, it was bred in the bone to be a frontiersman; but I cannot exactly understand a man raised so strangely at variance with this life of danger and hardship, as he seems to have been, voluntarily taking it up."

Thus mused the scout as he sat in the cabin of Lone Sam.

Suddenly he started. The light was quickly extinguished, and stepping to the door, rifle in hand, Buffalo Bill stood in an attitude of listening.

He heard the approach of several men, and they were talking as they came on.

Suddenly came a challenge in the scout's stern tones:

"Halt!"

"Who comes there?"

The men halted, and a voice called out:

"Ho, Lone Sam, we are coming to your cabin."

"Who are you?"

"The detectives you know, from the Giant Miner's cabin."

"Where are you going?"

"Our man is well enough to travel now, and we have come to take him east in the stage that goes by to-night."

Buffalo Bill was mystified.

Who and what were these men who called themselves detectives?

He had heard of no such men being in the country.

But it must be that Lone Sam knew about them.

The one they spoke of as the Giant Miner he had heard of—had, in fact, seen several times.

He knew him as a man of giant form, who dwelt alone in the mountains, going

to the camp only when he needed provisions, and constantly on the search for gold.

The Indians were afraid of him, the outlaws left him alone, and yet he was considered harmless, and a feverish searcher after gold, which it was said he never found, save only enough to buy food with.

Was it this man the detectives now said they had, and who was well enough to go east?

It could be no other, decided the scout. So he called out:

"I will light a lamp; so come on to the cabin."

As the lamp shed its light through the cabin, the men started on beholding a stranger to them where they had expected to see Lone Sam.

And Buffalo Bill beheld three men before him.

Two men in ordinary citizens' dress, and one stood on each side of a man of giant stature, with his head bound up with a handkerchief, a savage glance in his deep sunken eyes, and his general appearance haggard, unkempt, and with the appearance of suffering.

It was the Giant Miner of the mountains.

The other two men Buffalo Bill did not know.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE GIANT MINER.

Buffalo Bill was really startled at the appearance of the Giant Miner, so changed from when he had before seen him.

Then he was always neat in his attire, his hair and beard well kept, and his general appearance prepossessing.

Now he seemed like a man who had been hunted down, who stood awed in the face of foes.

What could it mean?

The two men were resolute, athletic fellows, and Buffalo Bill saw that they were strangers to the border.

The scout also saw that the Giant miner was manacled, small steel handcuffs being upon his wrists.

"You are not Lone Sam, the stock-tender?" said one of the men sternly.

"I did not claim to be, gentlemen."

"Who are you?"

"A pard of Lone Sam."

"Where is he?"

"Gone to overtake Nebraska Ned's coach with a message from me."

"That is the coach bound west?"

"On the contrary, it is the coach bound east."

"What?"

"Has it gone by?"

"Some hours ago."

"Then we missed it?"

"If you were going east—yes."

"It was ahead of time, then?"

"On the contrary, it was a trifle behind."

"Does it not pass here in the middle of the night?"

"No; soon after nightfall, if on time."

"Then we have made a mistake, or misunderstood Lone Sam when he told us."

"Doubtless."

"And we must wait another week for another coach?"

"Five days."

"That is too bad, for our man is able to travel now, and he may get violent by delay."

"Why have you that man in irons?"

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, as a harmless gold-hunter known as the Giant Miner."

"He is not so harmless as you think."

"Indeed?"

"He appears now to be suffering."

"We had to deal harshly with him to arrest him."

"You see, he received some severe blows on the head, but he is all right now, as far as the hurts are concerned; only off here, you know," and the speaker tapped his head.

"You lie!"

"I am not crazy, though God knows it is strange that I have not been driven so."

The words were uttered in a deep voice, ending in a tone that was pathetic.

"When did you come here after this man?"

"Three weeks ago."

"From the East?"

"Yes."

"You came to get him to return with you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He is mad, and escaped two years ago from the — Asylum."

"I am not mad; but I did escape from the asylum, where they put me to drive me crazy, and die."

"Don't mind him, for you hear how he talks."

"Why, he killed one of the keepers in making his escape."

"Yes, when the keeper sought to kill me, for they wanted me dead."

"I acted only in self-defense."

"Don't mind him, sir, for he is away off."

"But I do mind him, as any man is entitled to be heard."

"God bless you," moaned the Giant Miner.

"Who are you, anyway?" sharply said the detective who had done the most of the talking.

"I was just about to ask you that very question," said Buffalo Bill quietly.

"We told you."

"We are New York detectives."

"You must have more than your word out here to back you up."

"We have."

"What have you?"

"I could say our revolvers, but as you look like one in authority we are willing to show you our papers, if you prove your right to demand them."

"I have the right, or I would not interfere with officers of the law, as you claim to be."

"Then tell us your authority, and we will meet you half way."

"I am known out here as Buffalo Bill, but I am down upon the army roll at Fort Faraway as William F. Cody, Chief of Scouts."

"Buffalo Bill!"

The men uttered the name in a surprised tone, glanced at each other, and then one of them said:

"You have proof, I suppose, that you are the man you say you are?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"My word."

"That won't go with us."

"It must."

"I say it won't."

"Then I must give you further proof as you force it upon me."

"Out with it, for we are not men to be trifled with or scared off from our duty by men in buckskin."

"Here is my proof."

"Hands up! both of you!"

Just how it was the two detectives did not fully understand.

They were only certain that a revolver covered each one of them, that a piercing eye glanced along the sights of each weapon, and they found themselves at the mercy of the man whose proof they had demanded that he had a right to question their acts.

CHAPTER XXX.

PROOFS OF IDENTITY.

Caught completely off their guard, with the scout's revolvers covering them, and their manacled prisoner showing vigor and great nervousness, the two detectives readily showed a willingness to temporize, and one of them said:

"You are too quick with your weapons, mister."

"You refused to take my word."

"Well, if you say you are Buffalo Bill, I guess you are, for I think the way you draw and handle weapons is proof, from all I have heard of you."

"I am Chief of Scouts at the fort, and am more than willing to meet you half way; but it is my duty to know who men are that venture into this wild land, and especially when they come here to take a man away against whom no unkind word has been uttered."

"Show me proof of your claim as secret service officers, and then we can talk, for I also wear the badge of a detective, of the Rocky Mountain Police—see!" and the scout revealed a gold badge that he wore concealed from sight.

This was enough for the two detectives, and they at once offered their hands as comrades.

Then they also showed badges as New York detectives.

"Have you papers as well?" asked the scout.

"We have."

With this they showed official-looking papers, that testified to their being employed by the superintendent of an Eastern insane asylum to hunt down and bring back with them a certain dangerous lunatic, Morris Linton by name, and who, in making his escape, had killed a keeper.

The said Morris Linton was a giant in size, had been for years in the asylum referred to, and labored under the hallucination that he possessed a large fortune, of which certain parties were trying to rob him.

He had last been heard of in Omaha, and was then making his way to the far frontier.

Buffalo Bill read the papers carefully, noted the description of the man, and then said:

"Are you sure that this is your man?"

"We are."

"I make no denial of my name or identity, nor the charges against me," said the Giant Miner in a low tone.

"You confess then that you are the one these detectives seek?" asked the scout.

"Yes, Mr. Cody, I am Morris Linton, escaped from the — Asylum, and in making my escape I killed a keeper who was trying to kill me and thus get me out of the way, as I would not, in my despair, take my own life, or die a natural death."

"How did you track him here?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"We stopped at every stage station and made inquiries, showing his photograph and describing him, and a driver by the name of Left-Hand Larry told us such a man was gold-hunting back in the mountains from Stock-Tender Lone Sam's station.

"So we got off here. The stock-tender told us how to find our man, and we surprised him in his cabin, but did not capture him without a severe struggle, in which he was somewhat injured."

"May I ask if there is a reward for him?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the amount?"

"I think it is several thousand."

"Do you not know?"

"It is five thousand," said one of the detectives reluctantly.

"And all Lone Sam is interested then is in having shown you your man's retreat?"

"Yes, and he brought us provisions we had to send for."

"Well, gentlemen, in spite of your badges and official papers, I must say there are two sides to every question, and out here we have to be very particular."

"Lone Sam will be here within an hour or so, and in the meanwhile we will give up the cabin to your prisoner, and let him rest, for he seems weak, and to be suffering."

"Lie down on Sam's cot, my man, and rest quietly, and we will have a talk with you later and decide what is best to be done."

The two detectives evidently did not like this plan.

But they had had a sample of what Buffalo Bill would do if driven to it, and they agreed to leave it as the scout wished.

They saw that the man really was weak and suffering; he was ironed, and could escape only by the window or door, and they would take care to watch the outside of the cabin.

But there was a large price on the head of their man, all expenses were paid besides, and they had run him to earth and had no intention of losing him.

But something warned them not to go against Buffalo Bill.

Then, too, there was no coach eastward for days, and they could but submit with a good grace.

So the prisoner stretched himself upon the bed, the scout and the two ferrets left him alone, and going outside the cabin sat down to talk matters over.

It was the pair of detectives who did most of the talking, Buffalo Bill being an excellent listener, and they said all in their power to impress him with the strength of their case.

It was while they were talking that the scout's acute hearing caught the sound of hoofs approaching, and he said:

"Here comes Lone Sam now."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GIANT MINER AT BAY.

The detectives had not heard the sound that had caught the ear of Buffalo Bill.

But they listened for a moment, and were about to say they could catch no sound, when the scout said:

"He will come in sight soon."

And in a minute more a horseman appeared, coming rapidly along the trail. It was Lone Sam.

He seemed surprised to see several forms before his cabin.

"Well, Sam, back again, I am glad to see."

"Yes, sir."

"You overtook the coach?"

"Yes, sir, and all is well; but I have something to tell you, Chief Cody, when I have put my horse up. Ah! Here are the two detectives, I see, who came after the Giant Miner."

"Yes, and their prisoner is in the cabin, for they had hoped to catch Nebraska Ned's coach, but were too late."

"I am not sorry, for I hate to see that man taken back, for to me he doesn't seem crazy, and I have often talked with him; but, then, the law must have its way, I suppose."

"If in the right, but justice errs sometimes, Sam."

"You did not report the arrival of these detectives?"

"Yes, I wrote a note to the boss at Outfit City, but he sent no instructions."

Buffalo Bill was glad to hear what he did.

He no longer held any suspicion that Lone Sam was in the pay of the detectives, and felt that his sympathies were with the Giant Miner.

"Well, Sam, these gentlemen captured their man, but not without having to hurt him, and he really does not seem able to stand the long journey."

"I do not doubt their legal status in the matter; but out here a man cannot be treated unfairly, and we have not heard the other side."

"There is no other side when the fellow is an escaped lunatic," said one of the detectives.

"That may or may not be."

"I shall hear his story, and then, assured if he is really mad, and hence dangerous, you will be allowed to take him, as you desire."

"But we have never suspected his sanity, and he may have a story to tell also."

"I have regarded him as a man with a history—one who had had his whims, and nothing more."

"I have a duty to attend to that may call me off at any moment; so put your horse in the corral, Sam, and we will go in and have a talk with the prisoner."

"I do not see by what right you override our authority, sir, to take an escaped lunatic and a murderer," said one of the detectives harshly.

"I do so from a sense of justice."

"I do not go against your authority, but I do intend to hear his side of the story, for I know of cruel crimes that have been perpetrated against sane people who were said to be mad, and, though you are acting in the discharge of duty, those who sent you may have some axe to grind."

"Nothing of the kind."

"All is open and above board."

"Gentlemen, we will go in and hear the story of the accused man."

"And will you take his word against ours?" hotly asked one of the detectives.

"That depends upon the story, how it is told, and my own convictions in the matter."

"And suppose you side against us?"

"Then he shall remain here and have time and opportunity to get his proof," was the determined reply.

"That means that he will be allowed to escape and we will have all our work to do over."

"It means that he will be kept securely at the fort until it is decided whether his story is false and yours true."

"Come, Sam, we will all go in now, for I have a matter on hand that cannot be neglected."

So into the cabin went the scout, Lone Sam, and the two detectives.

Buffalo Bill was in advance, Lone Sam next to him, and the two ferrets had hung back for a word together.

But as they appeared in the door the large form of the Giant Miner suddenly rose from the bed, towering even above Buffalo Bill, and he bent forward as though about to make a spring upon the party.

The detectives uttered a cry as they suddenly beheld him, and one of them called out in alarm:

"See! he has freed himself of his irons."

"Yes, and has secured weapons in some way."

"Look out!" cried the other.

It did appear then as though the Giant Miner was really mad.

He had indeed broken the slender steel manacles from his wrists, and in some way had become possessed of Lone Sam's extra pair of revolvers hanging in the cabin.

The Giant Miner seemed about to fight for his life as he said in a low tone:

"You cannot take me alive."

"I will not go back to that hell on earth."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SCOUT'S DECISION.

That the Giant Miner was at bay and meant what he said there was not the shadow of a doubt.

But though the detectives shrunk back, Buffalo Bill and Lone Sam held their places.

The eyes of the scout were upon the man, though he made no effort to draw a weapon. What might have happened who could tell had Buffalo Bill's nerve failed him.

But it did not, and, keeping his eyes upon the miner, he said calmly:

"Come, pard, lay aside those weapons, for I have come to hear your story and see that justice is done you."

"Buffalo Bill, did other man than you say that to me I would fling the lie in his teeth, for no one has ever been just to me."

"I am the victim of a cruel plot, and I would die before I again submit to what I have suffered."

"But, as you tell me that justice will be shown me, I believe you, and I show my trust by submitting to you."

With the words the giant madman suddenly stepped toward Buffalo Bill and gave up his revolvers.

"You see, gentlemen, that this man means to act squarely."

"Madmen are always tricky," said one of the ferrets.

"He's got some game to spring on us," said the other.

"Now, with Chief Cody, I believe in his honesty of purpose," Lone Sam remarked.

"I thank you.

"I do mean to be square; but I wish to say that those men are to be well paid for capturing me, and so do not wish you to hear but one side.

"You have said that you will hear my story?"

"We will.

"Sit down and tell it to us."

"I cannot sit down. I am too nervous.

"I was left here, as you know, and supposed you had left me to my fate.

"So I broke these manacles, as I am a giant in strength as well as size.

"I intended to kill those men in self-defense.

"But to my story, Mr. Cody.

"I am a creature of unfortunate circumstances, from being born the heir to a fortune.

"There were other heirs, I being third on the list.

"But I was making a good living as a rancher in Texas, and was content.

"But lawyers hunted me out and showed me that the two heirs before me had died, one, it is said, taking his own life, the other being killed by highwaymen who sought to rob him, and nothing was between me and a million dollars.

"Of course, I was glad to hear the good news, and went North to claim it.

"But I had an anonymous letter sent to my hotel telling me that the two heirs before me had been foully dealt with; that the first one was not a suicide, but had been poisoned, the other had been killed, but by men paid to get him out of the way, and to be on guard or I would share the same fate.

"I at once denounced the affair to my lawyer, telling him to find out who would be benefited by my death, as they were the ones who had committed the two murders.

"That lawyer, I will swear, was in the pay of the heirs to get the fortune in case of my death.

"The lawyer came to me and said that he had found out about the anonymous letter, and would take me to the writer, who was in an asylum.

"I went with him, and that day begun my persecution, for I was incarcerated in the asylum as a madman.

"I am sure the superintendent was in the pay of the man to inherit my fortune, for but for my great endurance, watchfulness, and a dread of being poisoned, I would have been killed.

"I at last found my chance, and made my escape.

"In doing so I distinctly heard the command from the superintendent:

"He must never escape.

"Kill him! Shoot him!"

"I sprung upon the keeper, to struggle for the revolver he had, and which he tried to use.

"In the struggle the weapon was fired and the keeper dropped dead.

"I escaped, and, having some money I had kept concealed all the while, I made my way west.

"I was fearful of arrest and the consequences; so I came here to hunt for gold, hoping to get enough to go far from here and then begin suit for what was my own, and punish my foes.

"I had laid up a snug little sum—but these men appeared, and, professing friendship, they unexpectedly attacked me, dealing me stunning blows, as though to kill me.

"But they did not kill me, and but for you I would have been taken back to that asylum, and there I would have died.

"That is my story, Mr. Cody, and I

leave it for you to decide as to its being false or true."

"My mind is clear as to that," said Buffalo Bill.

"And your decision, sir?" asked one of the detectives.

"Is that this man has told the truth, and I shall have to hold you two men as kidnappers, in the plot against him, until it can be found out whether you are guilty or not, and letters be sent east to get at the bottom facts and the plotters arrested for their crime."

"A just decision, Chief Cody!" cried Lone Sam earnestly, while the Giant Miner uttered a low and fervent:

"Thank God! Justice at last!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A TURN ABOUT FAIR PLAY

At the decision of Buffalo Bill the two detectives were considerably taken aback.

They looked at each other in a strange way, and then one of them said:

"In doing what you call justice to this man you are very unjust to us, and you will have to answer."

"I mean to be just; but have you been?"

"You came upon the trail of this man like bloodhounds."

"If his mind is diseased, it is a visitation of misfortune that he is not responsible for, and should win sympathy, not cruelty.

"You doubtless know more of the facts than you admit, and came prepared to take him back, dead or alive.

"Though he did not know you, you accepted his hospitality and sprung upon him, and his wounds show the way in which you dealt with him.

"You came out here where military law rules, and did not go to the officer in command to explain your business and show your authority; but you tried to kidnap the man and take him back secretly.

"I have heard your story and his.

"The evidence is against you, and you are nothing but lawbreakers, and must submit to detention until this man has a chance to prove his case.

"Lone Sam, I shall place these men in your keeping to take to the fort, and you can explain all to Colonel Duncan, and just what I have done in the matter."

"I will, sir."

"The colonel will doubtless hold these men until this man has a chance to have his case investigated, for to let them free would be to give warning to the lawyer and asylum authorities to escape the punishment they deserve."

"And in holding us, what will you do with this madman?" asked one of the detectives, while the other said:

"Yes; you will give him a chance to escape, I suppose?"

Before Buffalo Bill could reply, the Giant Miner said:

"I am willing to go to the fort also, and to remain under confinement until the colonel investigates my story."

"You see that this man is willing to meet you half way."

"He can go to the fort and report to Colonel Duncan, leaving it to him to decide what is best."

"Then I will accompany Lone Sam and these men."

"But I would like to go by my cabin first, for I have hidden there all my proofs."

"Before I was taken to the asylum I left with a lawyer all my papers, letters, and other things of importance."

"When I escaped I wrote for them and they were sent to me, and I have kept them in hiding."

"You must get them and then go on to the fort, for they will be important."

"Now, Sam, as turn about is fair play, I will leave these men under the guard of the miner, while I have a talk with you, for dawn is at hand, I see."

The detectives swore, but it did no

good, and the scout and the stock-tender walked apart for a talk.

Buffalo Bill, in spite of his calm demeanor, had grown more and more anxious regarding the California coach.

Its not coming seemed to assure him that it had been held up further along the trail than he had supposed the road-agents to be stationed.

But if held up, why had the coach not come along after being robbed?

Had the driver turned off at the trail leading to the fort to report the hold-up?

Had an accident occurred to the coach, causing delay?

If the latter, why had not the driver come on to the station to seek Lone Sam's aid?

All these questions, which he could not answer, worried Buffalo Bill greatly.

So he decided to tell Lone Sam the story and hear what he had to say.

He felt that he could trust the stock-tender implicitly.

"Sam, I have something to tell you," he said, as the two walked away from the cabin, leaving the Giant Miner seated on a bench and watching the two detectives.

The latter had been disarmed by Buffalo Bill, but the miner had a revolver.

The detectives were wholly free otherwise, Buffalo Bill desiring to treat them as well as they would allow him to.

Disappearing behind some pinon trees, Buffalo Bill and Lone Sam had halted.

Though not seen by those at the cabin, they could see the three men there, and while talking kept their eyes upon them.

The scout had confidence in the miner, yet he was determined to be on the safe side.

When they had halted, Buffalo Bill went on to say:

"Now, Sam, first of all, I will say that I am sure it was a game to get rid of that miner, and I believe his story implicitly."

"As I do, and it looks as though they had intended to kill him, for money will make some men do any crime."

"Yes; but now to your chase after Nebraska Ned, for I am anxious to hear about it."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

"Well, Chief Cody, I overtook Nebraska Ned sooner than I expected, and at the trail that winds up the mountain.

"I heard three shots when not many hundred yards behind him, and that put me on my guard for danger, and, knowing that he must be in trouble, I determined to help him out."

"Just what I would expect of you, Sam," said Buffalo Bill.

"Thanks for your good opinion, Chief."

With this Lone Sam went on to tell his story of coming up with Nebraska Ned's coach, the flight of the robbers, and just what the driver had told him.

"There were four at least, Ned felt confident," Lone Sam continued.

"They also knew that he had a lady passenger on the coach, or had had."

"They knew this?" asked Buffalo Bill in surprise.

"Yes, sir; and more."

"Indeed?"

"They knew that Nebraska Ned had carried two bags of gold dust."

"Do you mean it?"

"They told him so."

"How did they get at his having the lady along?"

"I cannot understand it, nor could Ned."

"I can understand that some spy told them of the gold Nebraska Ned carried, but not about the lady passenger, for she only joined him at your cabin."

"Yes, but must have been shadowed there."

"True."

"And the trail a few miles beyond here is very broken."

"It is, indeed."

"And for forty miles it is zigzag along the mountain ridge, so that a man on horseback could cut across and head off the coach a dozen times—yes, oftener than that if he knew the deer trails well and the lay of the country."

"That is true, sir, and the outlaws, after seeing the woman come to my cabin to take the coach, could readily have headed her off."

"That is what they did when they held up Nebraska Ned."

"But they missed the gold and found the woman gone."

"What did Ned tell them?"

"He led them to believe he had been held up further back by some of their gang, the gold taken and the woman, too."

"Good."

"Were they satisfied with this?"

"They looked in the coach, and, finding the woman gone, believed him, and then I came up and helped Ned out."

"This is what I was anxious to tell you, that the Mounted Sharps knew of Ned's having a lady passenger along."

"Well, Sam, I am glad to be thoroughly posted as to their doings, for it is most important that I should be, as you will understand when you hear what I have to tell you, for I am going to ask your aid."

"I am at your service for life or death, Chief Cody," was the fervent response.

"I well know that, Sam."

"But what I tell you is a secret, known only to Captain Loyd Winter, or at least supposed to be, and I tell you frankly I am out on the trail now for big game."

"Somehow I half suspected that you were playing a bold hand and some waiting game."

"It is just this, Sam."

"There have been so many, and such daring attacks upon the Overland coaches and the pony riders for the past six months that Captain Winter began to feel certain that the Mounted Sharps must have spies very close to him."

"The truth came out when he began to watch the hold-ups, that coaches and pony riders bearing no treasure went through unmolested."

"That was sure proof of an outlaw spy system."

"Yes."

"And coaches with passengers who had money were halted, while those who carried people, though supposed to be poor, never saw a road-agent."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"And it caused Captain Winter to send for me."

"The colonel told me what was wanted of me, and I at once volunteered to go."

"Of course you would."

"It's that kind of a bold game you like to play, Chief Cody."

"The colonel told me to take what scouts of my company I wished and to call upon him for any number of soldiers."

"That was liberal."

"Yes; but I refused all."

"Refused help?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"If the outlaws have the spies they are suspected of having, they would at once know that a hunt was to be begun."

"True."

"That would drive them all off the trails, all would be quiet, and when the hunt had ended they would begin their old crimes again."

"You are right."

"So I decided to simply play a lone hand."

"And a bold one."

"Well, I am playing it now, but I have come to a point where I need aid, and you are the man to help me, Lone Sam."

"And I am the man that will do it," was the prompt response of the stock-tender.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BUFFALO BILL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

When Lone Sam said what he did he held out his hand and the scout warmly grasped it.

He knew that in the stock-tender he had a friend in need, and he was just then in sad need of an ally.

Then Buffalo Bill went on to tell about the coach coming through from California and that it was driven by Lige Lumley, a good man and true, and whom they both knew.

"Now, it is said that these Californians carry a large fortune with them, and it is most foolish for them to do so, but as they have taken the risk we must do all in our power to protect them, if not too late, for let me tell you that the coach was due here last night two hours behind Nebraska Ned."

"That looks bad."

"Yes, it does."

"I rode up the trail last night, hoping to meet it, intending to take it by the valley trail you know of."

"Yes, a long way round, but safe."

"But the coach failed to materialize, and so the matter stands."

"There are how many in the party?"

"The Californian, Lee Insley by name, his daughter, Lola, a young lady, and a man and maid servant, with dead loads of treasure."

"Why did they not go by sea across Panama?"

"The old gentleman went by sea to California, and its terrors he would not risk again."

"He should have sent his treasure that way at least."

"But he would not, so may lose it."

"And what is to be done?"

"We will have breakfast and then you skip out with these men to the fort, and that gives you the chance to find out if the Californian went there."

"Yes."

"If not, you come back, and I will have returned from my run up the trail to see if I can get any trace of the coach."

"And if not we can set to work to find it, for as no coach comes through for five days, I can leave my cabin for at least twenty-four hours at a time, and we can get on the track of these Mounted Sharps and find their retreat."

"That is just what I wish."

"But do you know they have a Chinaman in the outfit, and one who holds up the coaches?"

"The Lord have mercy!"

"A regular Chinaman?"

"Yes."

"The devil take the heathen."

"Why these Chinamen are picking up all the work of the Melican man—oh, Lord, how funny! A Chinaman road-agent!"

"I'll give you another surprise, Lone Sam."

"I can stand it, after hearing of the heathen road-agent."

"There is a negro road-agent, too, in the band."

"Holy Africa! A darkie?"

"Yes."

"Well, well."

"You do not remember Darkie Dick, the colonel's negro servant, for he had left the fort before you came on in the Overland."

"I have heard of him."

"They called him Darkie Dick, the Black Burglar."

"That is the man."

"And he has taken to the road?"

"To all appearances he has, but I do not exactly understand about him, and I have kept my discovery a secret."

"He it was who told me that the Mounted Sharps knew of the coming of the Californian."

"Ah!"

"That shows how thorough is their spy system."

"But when did you see him, may I ask, Chief Cody?"

Buffalo Bill told of his being held up

by Captain Coolhand, and then of his meeting with Darkie Dick.

Lone Sam listened with deepest attention to all the scout said, and then the two arranged what they thought best to be done and returned to the cabin.

Then Lone Sam set to work to get breakfast, and this over he mounted the two detectives and the miner upon the Overland Company's horses, and rode off with them toward the fort.

The detectives seemed much crestfallen at their failure to accomplish their mission, and one of them boldly informed the scout that when Colonel Duncan heard their story he would reverse the decision against them.

"It is for him to do so, gentlemen; but I have simply done my duty as I saw it."

"Don't forget, Sam, to go by the miner's cabin with him."

"No, I will go there first," and the four rode off, the miner leading the way, the detectives following side by side, and Lone Sam bringing up the rear.

Buffalo Bill saw them depart, then locked up the cabin and mounting his horse rode up the trail.

He came to the trail leading to Fort Faraway and instantly halted.

There was a separate trail from the one made by the regular coach that caught his eye.

"That settles it, for the Californians did turn to Fort Faraway, and more, they came back again."

"I must look for the coach between here and Lone Sam's cabin, for not expecting it had come this far, I did not reach the trail as I came along."

"Now, where can that coach have disappeared?"

"It certainly could not have passed Lone Sam's cabin, unless it went by without stopping, and at a very slow pace, for I heard not the slightest sound."

"If the coach did go by, then the road-agents had captured it and then sneaked by."

"But it was strange that Lone Sam did not see it when he went after Nebraska Ned."

"The road-agents had doubtless run it off the trail somewhere, to rob it nearer their retreat."

Thus mused the scout for some minutes.

But, being convinced that the extra coach had certainly been in to Fort Faraway, and returned on its eastward run, he mounted his horse and started back over the trail to Lone Sam's cabin, watching every foot of the way as he rode slowly along.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MYSTERY OF A NIGHT.

The sun was a couple of hours above the horizon when Buffalo Bill made the discovery that the California coach had certainly been following Nebraska Ned, and had gotten as far on his way as the turn-off from the fort trail.

It had gone in there to the fort for some reason, known best to Lige Lumley, the driver.

It had come out again and there were the tracks leading along the main Overland trail and toward Outfit City.

But where was the coach?

Had the Californians been left at the fort, where the coaches passed each way only once in five days, it was easy to see the tracks they left.

Worried at the mysterious disappearance of the California coach in the night, Buffalo Bill kept on its trail toward Lone Sam's cabin.

He knew that Lone Sam and his party were even then at the Giant Miner's cabin.

The last was some half a dozen miles back of Lone Sam's cabin, and one could cut across from there to the fort.

If they had reached there on time, then Lone Sam would not be long in returning, the scout felt assured.

As he rode along, Buffalo Bill saw

Buffalo Bill's Bluff.

the trails of the three coaches plainly marked.

There was Left-Hand Larry's trail to the fort.

Then there was the trail of Nebraska Ned's coach eastward.

Last, and queerest of all, was the trail of the extra coach.

Looking well at this, Buffalo Bill's experienced eye saw that Lige Lumley had been driving fast.

The coach had gone along at a much more rattling pace than had Left-Hand Larry's and Nebraska Ned's.

Quicken his pace, for each moment he grew more and more anxious, Buffalo Bill at last came to a broad, shallow stream that the trail crossed.

It was in a hole, densely timbered, and the sun did not even penetrate there at noonday.

Giving his horse a few swallows of water, the scout rode on.

The brook was not over two miles from Lone Sam's cabin.

That proved that the California coach had certainly gotten that far on its way to Outfit City.

The scout felt deeply chagrined.

He condemned himself, for he had allowed the extra coach to get by him in some way.

But if so it had not halted at Lone Sam's cabin.

But why had it passed without getting fresh horses?

Perhaps Lige had changed horses at the fort, for there was a corral of stage animals kept there, in case of need, though a change was not frequently made at that point.

But that must be the excuse for Lige Lumley not stopping at Lone Sam's in the night.

He had passed right on by.

If he had, and the scout felt that he could have done nothing else, why the road-agents had held him up and the Californians had been robbed.

In that case there was nothing to be done save track the band of Mounted Sharps to their retreat, and get the treasure back if possible.

Buffalo Bill knew that two pony-riders were due within an hour at Lone Sam's cabin.

One would be bound west, the other east, and halt for a change of horses.

The Overland coaches sent their pony-riders through each way every other day, but the coaches only once in five days.

The rider could tell him who came from Outfit City, where he had met Lige Lumley's coach on the trail and if it had been robbed.

But the scout little doubted but that it had been.

The pony-rider bound east could take a note to Captain Loyd Winter telling the exact situation.

Before they arrived Lone Sam would doubtless be back, so he would know just why the extra had gone in to the fort.

So the scout rode on rapidly toward the stock-tender's cabin.

He had not followed the trail through the dark valley, but rode along with his thoughts busy until he began to leave the bottomland.

After riding for half a mile he looked down to take note of the trail again.

Suddenly he reined his horse to a halt.

"There is no trail here."

"The extra has not passed along."

So he said with evident surprise.

There were the trails of Nebraska Ned's and Larry's coaches.

But that was all.

The trail of the extra coach was not there.

Instantly Buffalo Bill wheeled his horse and started back on the trail.

He must find the trail of the missing coach, and just where it had left the Overland.

But as he rode along it did not catch his eye, and he searched the brook without finding any trace of it.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE STOCK-TENDER'S RETURN.

Buffalo Bill rode across the brook, which at that point was nearly a hundred yards wide, and upon the other shore came upon the missing trail of the extra coach.

There it was, leading into the brook, as did the trails of the two other coaches.

But it did not reappear on the other side as the others did.

Many men, and good plainsmen, would have gone along over that trail and never minded the third coach trail.

But Buffalo Bill did so, and it at once told him that the coach had been turned off the road.

But for what reason?

That accounted for its not having stopped at Lone Sam's cabin.

Back on the trail was the place where he had intended to branch off and flank the outlaws.

But the extra coach had not left the Overland there.

It had certainly left it, however, at the brook.

But had Lige Lumley branched off there of his own accord, or had the Mounted Sharps captured the coach, was the question that Buffalo Bill was to answer.

He examined the bed of the brook most carefully.

The stream was not over a foot in depth, and ran over a pebbly bottom.

Had the coach gone up or down the stream?

If up the stream, that would take it right by the cabin of Lone Sam.

The brook led back of his cabin, winding around in that direction as Buffalo Bill knew.

If down the stream the coach had gone, then it had continued on into the valley and thence to the trail Buffalo Bill had intended to lead it.

Perhaps Lige Lumley had known of this secret trail and had taken it upon his own responsibility.

Buffalo Bill hoped that such was the case.

He followed along in the bed of the stream for half a mile, and saw that the coach could have driven down it.

But the march of the waters had destroyed all tracks of the wheels and horses.

"Well, I do not wish to miss the two pony-riders or be away when Sam returns, so I will go back to the cabin."

"When I learn what Sam has to say and what the rider from Outfit City can tell me, I will be prepared to act with a full knowledge of the situation."

So saying to himself, Buffalo Bill retraced his way to the trail and went at a gallop toward Lone Sam's cabin.

He soon arrived at the cabin, put his horse in the corral and sat down to await the coming of Lone Sam.

He had not long to wait, for Lone Sam soon appeared, dashing along the trail at a run.

The horse he rode had been pushed hard, and he was driving before him the three animals which the detectives and the Giant Miner had ridden, and which belonged to the Overland Company, the stock-tender having a couple of dozen good animals in his keeping for the use of the coaches and pony-riders.

As the horses halted at the corral and Lone Sam dismounted, he called:

"You have made some discovery, chief, I feel sure."

"Yes, the extra coach went to the fort."

"It did, and Lige Lumley got fresh horses there."

"And started on to Outfit City?"

"Yes, but we missed him, for he did not stop here for some reason, though why I cannot understand, and how he got by without our seeing him I do not comprehend."

"I do."

"Then you know?"

"Yes."

"He left the fort all right, I was told."

"But never passed here, Sam."

"Ah!"

"Then he took the valley trail—Lige is a keen one."

"Sam, he turned off at the brook, driving down the bed of the stream, so what does that mean?"

"It looks bad."

"As though the road-agents had held him up."

"Yes, sir."

"Then they took the whole outfit, coach, team, driver, and the passengers."

"So much the better, for they will be that much more readily tracked."

"That's so."

"But what did you find out at the fort?"

"Only that Lige went in there, got a fresh team and left some two hours behind Nebraska Ned."

"Did you see Left-Hand Larry?"

"Yes, sir, and he asked about you, and what I thought of Nebraska Ned's losing his lady passenger."

"You saw the colonel?"

"Oh, yes, sir, and gave him your note and told him about the detectives."

"I heard him mutter to himself:

"That man Cody is a wonder."

"Then he questioned the detectives, next the Giant Miner, and said very decidedly that he would uphold your decision and hold the men at the fort until the miner had time to prove his side of the case."

It was evident that Buffalo Bill was pleased that the colonel sustained him in the way he had acted, but he said nothing and Lone Sam went on to report that the Giant Miner was to show to the colonel the papers he had gotten from his cabin, and have him write east and investigate the whole business for him.

"Well, Sam, that has turned out all right, and that man will prove that he has been cruelly wronged."

"Now, it is time for the pony-riders to be coming in sight, and you must detain the man bound to Outfit City for me to write a note by him to Captain Loyd Winter."

"I will, sir—there comes the west-bound rider now," and Lone Sam sprung toward the corral to have his horse ready for him when he came up.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE PONY-RIDER'S REPORT.

Afar away down the trail a dark object was visible, the center of a cloud of dust.

It was apparently rolling rapidly toward the cabin. Following the winding of the trail nearer and nearer it came, until it took the shape of a horse, stretched out at full speed in flight, and with a rider upon his back.

Nearer and nearer came the flying horse, until the clatter of his hoofs could be heard, and, as Lone Sam led out the fresh animal he was to mount there, he came up with a rush, and suddenly came to a halt.

The wiry young pony-rider threw himself from his saddle and ran to mount the impatient horse Lone Sam had hold of, and which was bridled and saddled ready for the road, when Buffalo Bill called out:

"Hold, Frank, I must delay you a minute or two."

"All right, Chief Cody."

"I'm a few minutes ahead, so can stand it," replied Frank Fletcher.

"Who did you meet on the trail from Outfit City?"

"Nebraska Ned's coach."

"Was he on time?"

"Yes, and driving rapidly."

"Any talk with him?"

"Only a how-dy."

"See any one else?"

"Not a photograph of any one."

"No road-agents?"

"None."

"Anything startling in Outfit City?"

"Nothing."

"Thank you, Frank."

"I was afraid the Mounted Sharps might be at their old tricks again."

"Thank the Lord, no."

"So long," and the pony-rider leaped into his saddle and was away, just as up the slope was seen another horseman coming at a slapping pace.

"Here comes Rufe Scales, chief," called out Lone Sam, and he turned again to the corral.

The two riders passed each other with a friendly wave of the hand, and a shout of welcome and good-by all in one, and a couple of moments after up dashed Rufe Scales, a stern-faced, wiry-built man who looked like one to fight his way through any danger in the discharge of duty.

"Ho, Mr. Cody, glad to see you," he called out, as he threw himself from his saddle, his leather saddle pouches clasped tightly.

But he did not find his mount then, and called out:

"Hello, Lone Sam!"

"Once I caught you napping."

"No, Scales, Lone Sam would not lead your horse out, as he says he is such a devil to hold, and I have a letter for you to carry to Captain Winter."

"Certainly, Pard Cody, always glad to oblige you."

"No news up the trail, I suppose?"

"No."

"Met the coach on time?"

"Who was on the box, for Left-Hand Larry laid off at the fort on this run?"

"Didn't see, it was before day when I met him; but think it was Hank Rowlings."

"Did you see any one else on the trail?"

"No one, all clear."

Buffalo Bill wrote a few lines rapidly, thrust the slip of paper in an envelope he took from his pocket, and said:

"Here is the letter for the boss."

"All ready, Sam."

As Rufe Scales thrust the letter into his pocket Lone Sam came out of the corral with a black horse that was vicious in the extreme, and came plunging along as though fretting at the delay.

With a whoop, Rufe Scales threw himself upon his back, the animal made a spring into the air that would have thrown any less skillful rider, and went off like a shot from a cannon.

Buffalo Bill and Lone Sam watched the pony-rider for a moment in silence, and then the former said:

"Well, Sam, I have written the boss just how matters stand, and my letter to Colonel Duncan by you acquainted him also with the facts."

"I told them both that I needed no other aid, save such as you could give me, but if they deemed it best, to send me assistance; I could be reached at your cabin."

"I do not believe either will send."

"Why?"

"They both have the utmost confidence in you, and know that if you felt that you really needed help you would have asked for it."

"Well, I may yet; but I believe now that the best way to hunt these road-agents is under cover."

"We could not capture them, nor rescue those two young gentlemen, the colonel's friends, or the Californians, if they are also the prisoners of the outlaws, with a whole regiment of soldiers; but we can do it, I firmly believe, by strategy, and finding out just where to strike the blow."

"That is my way of thinking."

"Now, we know that Nebraska Ned had gone on his way, and made up time, as Frank Fletcher so reported."

"Yes, and also that Fletcher met no extra coach."

"Yes."

Rufe Scales met the coach bound west well on its way."

"So he did."

"And neither of the riders saw a road-agent."

"That seems strange."

"No, for they had done their work, caught their prey, the Californians, and so had left the trail for their retreat, sending the news along to the different squads."

"That is just it; but what about the lady passenger who disappeared from Ned's coach?"

"Well she, the two young men taken from Left-Hand Larry's coach, and the Californians, are to be found, and in finding them we unearth the road-agents, and once we know their retreat and strength, we can easily get aid to capture the outfit."

"I am with you."

"Then we will have dinner and start upon the trail of the lost coach," said Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE LOST COACH.

Dinner was disposed of, the cabin locked, the horses put in the large corral, and mounted upon two good animals, Buffalo Bill and Lone Sam started out in search of the lost coach.

Going directly to the brook that crossed the trail, the tracks of the California extra were seen plainly to have entered the stream.

Down the bank of the brook they rode one on either side to note if the coach had left the water, and they rode rapidly along, for it was the scout's desire to get along as far as possible before nightfall, when, while he went into camp, Lone Sam would have to return to his cabin and look after the horses, but come back the next day.

But Buffalo Bill hoped to find some trace of the coach before night came on.

He knew that the brook they were following flowed into a larger stream in the valley through which ran the trail he intended to have taken the coach of the Californians.

Whether the bed of the stream allowed of the coach to drive all the way along it, keeping in the water, he did not know, but if it left the brook on either side one of them must discover the fact.

After many miles had been gone over Lone Sam called over from his side: "Maybe it was Lige Lumley that took to the stream, pard, intending to reach the valley trail by this way."

"Perhaps, but I hardly believe it."

"He might have feared going by the trail that branched off, as his tracks could have been plainly seen by the outlaws."

"I hope that it was so, Sam."

And so they rode on.

The country, as they descended from the mountains, grew wilder, and canyons appeared here and there on either side, but when their way was obstructed one or the other would turn into the stream, the bed of which could still be followed only in places, it being rough for the coach.

Going with the stream, which flowed rapidly, it would have been easy traveling for the coach team, but terribly hard if faced against the current.

At last Buffalo Bill came to a halt.

The river that was in the valley was but a mile or two beyond, and there the smaller stream entered it.

But the latter was becoming impassable for a coach along its bed, and when the scout had drawn rein there was a deep wash that barred his way.

But down in the depths of the ravine he saw the trail of the coach.

It had left the brook there.

The one who drove it knew that he could follow the bed of the stream no further.

"Come over, Sam."

The stock-tender heard the scout's call and plunged into the stream.

"Come out in the ravine here and follow it to its head."

"Ay, ay," answered Lone Sam, and, as he reached the bank, where the ravine, in rainy weather, sent a small creek into the stream, he called out:

"Here is the coach trail."

"Yes, follow it up, for I cannot get down there."

Half a mile back from the stream Lone Sam came out at the head of the ravine. Buffalo Bill met him there.

There was the trail of the lost coach, and it led away across the valley toward the river, a mile away.

Instantly the two pards begun to follow it at a gallop.

As they neared the river they could see that the banks were high and steep, and it would be a long distance down to the water.

The trail Buffalo Bill had intended to take the coach crossed the river miles above where it was fordable, and ran down the valley upon the other side.

How had the driver of the coach gotten it across, for rugged work it would have been to go down on that side of the stream both men saw.

But there led the trail straight toward the river bank.

Would they find it there, hidden in some ravine.

Night was not far off, they had come twenty miles from the cabin, and they would not have much longer to work.

So they still further quickened their pace.

Drawing nearer the river they saw where the coach had been brought to a halt.

There were tracks all about it, the footprints of men and horses.

The ground was of such a nature that the tracks were all plainly visible.

Then the coach had been driven on again.

The tracks showed that the horses had been put to a rapid pace.

What could it mean, with the river cliffs only a short distance ahead.

Then the ground grew harder, the tracks were hardly visible at all, but the trail led straight to the cliffs.

Soon the ground grew of too flinty a nature to reveal any trail.

But the two trailers held on.

They drew their horses to a slower pace as they neared the cliffs.

Nearer and nearer, until the edge was just before them, and they could see that the bank went off sheer two hundred feet to the river below.

Halting near the edge, they sprung from their horses and looked over.

Standing on the very edge, they looked over, and Buffalo Bill called out:

"There is the coach!"

CHAPTER XL.

AS BUFFALO BILL SAW IT.

The two men stood in silence upon the edge of the cliff, gazing down at the depth far below them.

The cliffs were far apart, the river running near the left bank, and upon the rocks under where Buffalo Bill and Lone Sam stood were the horses and the coach.

They had found the lost coach.

But it seemed terrible to behold it as it was.

Shattered to atoms, and with the horses dead, it was a pitiable sight.

At last Lone Sam spoke, breaking the silence that had lasted for moments.

"What a fate to meet; for I guess they all went over together."

"Why?"

"My idea is that Lige Lumley, poor fellow, tried to save his passengers and their treasure, to throw the road-agents off his trail."

"Well."

"So he took to the brook, and when he got to where he believed his trail would not be seen, he turned out on the plateau and pushed ahead rapidly."

"And drove over the cliff?"

"Yes."

"In the darkness?"

"Just so."

"That would be all right, Sam, but for two or three things."

"What are they?"

"We saw where the coach had left the brook."

"Yes."

"It was daylight then."

"Ah!"

"He could not have found that ravine from his box in the darkness."

"That's so."

"It was dawn, at least."

"I guess you are right."

"When he came out of the ravine upon this plateau, as you followed the trail, we saw that he began to drive rapidly."

"So he did."

"We then came to where he had halted."

"Yes."

"And there were tracks of men and horses about the coach."

"The hoof-marks were not made by the coach horses, but by others that came up then, and I noticed that the boot-tracks were made by more than three men, namely, the Californian, his servant, and Lige Lumley."

"I don't wonder at the fame you have won, Pard Bill, from the way you read signs."

"Now, from that halting place of the coach the trail came directly here."

"Now and then the ground was too hard for us to see it, but here, on the edge of the cliff, as you see, there are the traces of the horses and coach going over."

"Yes, distinctly visible."

"Now, those coach horses would not have gone over this cliff in the darkest night, their instinct would have warned them of danger, could they not have seen."

"But there they are."

"Yes; and I'll wager big money that they were blindfolded, muzzled, put at a rush, and thus sent over."

"Oh Lord!"

"If not, they were brought here and forced over, the coach being rolled after them."

"Then you do not think any one went over with the coach?"

"No, indeed."

"You believe the Mounted Sharps did it."

"Yes, of course."

"But why?"

"They had in the coach an elephant on their hands."

"They wished to get rid of it; to hide it, so that they could not be tracked by it, and so they took to the brook and brought it here."

"You are on the right trail, I guess, Pard Cody."

"I may be wrong, but I think it as I see it all."

"You see, they thought the horses and coach, falling from this height, would roll into the river."

"But they did not by a dozen or more feet."

"No."

"Had they done so the current would have swept them away and all trace would have been lost of them."

"And they either did not look over to see the result, or could not get down to remedy it."

"No."

"And the people?"

"The outlaws have taken them to their retreat, and I am glad of it."

"Glad of it?"

"They are holding them for a ransom, of course, not content with what they found in the coach."

"I see."

"Had they been satisfied, they would have skipped off and left their victims and that would have been the end of them."

"But as they have held the people prisoners, it means that they intend to stay until they get more money from them."

"So we can hunt them down."

"Just that."

"Well, you have read the whole story like an open book, Chief Cody."

"It is as I see it."

"But now I will go in search of a camp, we will have supper, and then you can start back for your cabin, while I

look up a place where I can go over the cliff."

"You will remain at your cabin until after midnight, to pasture your horses, but then corral them again and start here, coming at a pace that will get you here by dawn, when I will have breakfast ready for you and then we can go to work, for I wish you to bring back half a dozen extra horses with you."

"I'll do it," said Lone Sam, who now saw Buffalo Bill's plan.

CHAPTER XLI.

FOUND.

Buffalo Bill found a camping place a mile back from the cliffs, where there was a little brook, wood, and grass, and, after supper he saw Lone Sam start upon his return for his cabin, while he went off on foot to reconnoitre for a good place to descend to the river bed the following morning.

He still had half an hour of daylight and hoped to find some break in the cliff, or tree to which a line could be attached for his descent.

But darkness came on, and, as far as he could see in either direction the cliff remained unbroken and he could not find a tree or boulder near its edges to which to attach the lariats.

Returning to his lone camp through the darkness, he turned in at once, for the night before he had had no rest.

Trained to awaken when he desired to, he arose an hour before dawn, placed his horse in a fresh grazing ground, built a fire and had breakfast ready just as he heard the sound of hoofs.

"On time, Pard Sam," he called out, as the stock-tender dismounted.

"Yes, as you are also."

"All goes well at the cabin?"

"Yes, and I had a good rest, the horses nearly all night in the pasture, so they can stand it until my return tonight, for to-morrow is pony-riders' day."

"Yes, but we have to-day before us and must make some discovery."

"I hope so."

The two ate their breakfast and then Buffalo Bill said:

"There is not a tree or rock on the cliffs to tie a lariat to, so I must make my horse do duty as holder."

"You brought the lariats?"

"Yes, seven of them, besides my own, and we have yours and the stake ropes."

Together they went over to the cliff, leading Buffalo Bill's horse, saddled and bridled, while the animal belonging to Lone Sam was left to graze and rest after his rapid gallop of over twenty miles.

They halted near where the coach had gone over, and the horse was placed in position, the lariats tied together and then doubled.

One end was then made fast to the saddle horn, a blanket placed over the edge of the cliff to prevent the line from wearing and the other end thrown over.

It fell to the rocks below with a few feet to spare.

Divesting himself of his boots, coat and weapons Buffalo Bill said:

"Lone Sam, this is the only way to get down there, except for those vultures."

"I guess so."

"I know so, for see, there is not a coyote there after those dead horses, and this proves nothing can get down the cliff anywhere."

"You are right."

"But I had not thought of that, Pard Cody."

"Now I will hold the horse."

This Lone Sam did, while Buffalo Bill swung himself over the cliff on the line, as fearlessly as a sailor would have done.

He went down rapidly hand over hand, pausing at loops tied here and there, for a rest, and soon Lone Sam no longer felt the strain upon the line.

Then he walked to the edge of the cliff and saw Buffalo Bill examining the shattered coach.

"There is no one there?"

"Not a soul."

After a moment Buffalo Bill called up:

"The cushions of the coach are gone."

Then came:

"There is not a thing of value about the coach."

A moment after:

"The lanterns of the coach were removed."

Then, from time to time, as discoveries by the scout were made, came the information:

"There were six horses to the coach, as the trail showed, but only four are here."

"Two were kept."

"The horses were blindfolded and muzzled to send them over."

"The reins and traces were taken off the harness, for use some other time."

"No baggage is in the coach."

"I have found a lady's handkerchief."

"It has the initials: 'L. I.'"

Soon after came the words:

"I am coming up."

"I can find out nothing more."

Lone Sam ran to the horse, and then came the strain upon the rope.

The scout had begun the hard climb.

And it was a hard climb of two hundred feet, but, with rests here and there at the loops, was made in safety.

Lone Sam grasped the hand of the bold climber as he saw him appear above the cliff and said:

"Well, now to follow the trail of the outlaws, I suppose?"

"Yes, back from where we saw those tracks."

"You are more certain than ever about the outlaws having robbed the coach?"

"Yes, for there is not a vestige of anything being in the coach, in fact, it was robbed of everything the outlaws thought they might find use for."

"Now we will break up camp and take the trail of the Mounted Sharps and their victims."

And this they did.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE CALIFORNIANS.

Along the Overland stage trail, upon the afternoon of the day when Buffalo Bill is presented to the reader in his conversation with Loyd Winter at Outfit City, a large and comfortable coach was rolling along, drawn by a team of six good horses.

Upon the box sat a man of athletic build, cool, decided face, and with long hair and drooping moustache.

He was dressed in frontier garb, wore a broad sombrero, and, in addition to a belt of arms, had a rifle swung along the box seat.

On the top of the coach were a couple of saddles and bridles, one of them for a lady, and there was a tent rolled up and a camping outfit.

Within the coach there were four persons.

The two on the back seat were a gentleman of middle age, with dark, handsome face, and dressed in a traveling suit, and a young and very beautiful girl of eighteen.

Her form was faultlessly molded, and she wore a dark cloth habit and slouch hat with a plume.

In every feature of her face there was perfection, and she had a voice that was low and musical, as she commented upon the scenery upon which her eyes were turned.

The two upon the front seat were a man who looked to be a Mexican and a pretty woman, his wife, and who had the same dark eyes, hair, and complexion of her husband, showing that they were of the same nationality.

"I like this new driver, Lige Lumley he said his name was, Lola, and he is to be with us for several days, he tells me," said the gentleman, addressing the young girl by his side.

"Yes, father, I think he is the best driver we have had on our way, though all were good; but he is more genial and somehow inspires perfect confidence."

"So he strikes me, and I am glad, for

I learn that from Death Trap Canyon to Good Luck Camp is the most dangerous part of our journey, as far as meeting outlaws is concerned."

"Sh, father; do not speak of outlaws, as you will frighten Anita," said Lola Insley, with a look at her Mexican maid.

"You know Anita's experience in old Mexico, Senorita Lola, with outlaws—that is why she dreads them," said Sanchez, her husband, and who was the California millionaire's man-servant.

"Yes, they killed my poor father when I was with him, señorita."

"But what you and your father can risk, Sanchez and I should not fear," Anita replied.

"I am sorry we reach Fort Faraway in the night, but then we had best not halt there only to make the transfer this driver advises," Mr. Insley said.

"I think it was an excellent suggestion, father, in the driver; but do you think we had better risk the other?"

"Yes, I think so."

"What does the driver think?"

"I did not speak to him about it."

"Well father, it may be all right—let us hope so," replied Lola Insley.

Soon after a relay station was reached, and, having expressed a desire to change from the coach to horseback, two extra horses were brought out, and the saddles on top of the stage were put upon them, and the father and daughter mounted.

They kept along with the coach, now ahead, now behind it, enjoying the scenery, and came to the supper station just at dark.

All enjoyed the crude, but substantial meal, and Lola and her father gave up their horses and returned to the coach.

The next halting place would have been Lone Sam's cabin, had it not been determined to go in to the fort.

Lige Lumley brought the extra into the fort but a short distance behind Nebraska Ned, and a fresh team was secured there, while the Californians got out, had a talk with an officer, and some heavy satchels were taken out from under the rear seat and left at the post.

Then the coach rolled on its way once more, and it had gone several miles when Lola Insley called out to Lige Lumley to halt.

He promptly did so.

"I do not care to sleep, so will ride with you, Mr. Lumley," she said.

"I'm that pleased at havin' yer, miss, I don't know what to say," was the polite response.

"Do you not get very lonely on your long drives, sir?"

"I will git lonesome after this run, miss; but I'd got used to it before."

"That appeared to be a fine foft, from what I could see of it in the darkness."

"It is, miss, and it's all that keeps hell—I beg pardon, miss, but I said it, so might as well continue—I was sayin' it was all that keeps ther devil from bein' raised on this border all ther time, with ther redskins, ther desperadoes in ther camps, and ther outlaws."

"I believe this is the most dangerous part of our trail, sir."

"It is, miss, but as yer father tuk my advice and left his gold coin with ther paymaster at ther fort, until it could go east sometime along with a guarded coach, ther Mounted Sharps will git nothing much, only skeer you a little."

"But my father did not tell you that we had a very large sum in paper money and a like value in jewelry and gems along."

"Thet was not left at ther fort along with ther gold?" asked Lige Lumley, excitedly.

"Yes, for I have it with me in the little satchel I cling so closely to."

"My God, miss! don't tell me that!" cried the driver, with intense excitement.

"But it is true."

"He did not speak to you of that with the gold."

"Great Lord! it's as good as gone, miss, gone!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

LOLA INSLEY'S PLUCK.

The manner and words of Lige Lumley fairly startled Lola Insley, though she was a girl of remarkable nerve and undoubted pluck.

"Then there is nothing to do but to turn back to the fort and leave our other valuables," said Lola quietly.

"No, no, miss, don't turn back, for its bad luck, indeed it is."

"Yet to go on will be to lose a fortune, if we are held up."

"Yes, miss."

"You feel sure, sir, that the outlaws are going to hold us up, as you call it out here."

"I can see that from your manner."

"I don't deny it, miss. I have seen things that told me as well as so many words that your coming is known."

"That is why I asked your pa to leave ther yeller metal at ther fort; but I didn't think he'd only half do it."

"Is there no way to save it?"

"Yes, miss, there's a chance."

"What is it?"

"I have six horses here, and two of 'em kin be spared fer a while, and I knows deer trails I kin cut off miles by takin' on horseback."

"Yes."

"My plan is fer yer father ter go with me and cut ahead to Lone Sam's station."

"A stock-tender?"

"Yes, miss, and a gent from way back, if he does herd horses."

"Yes; it is the man, not his calling, I have found."

"That is gospil, miss, if it hain't tuk from ther Bible."

"But what would you go to this Lone Sam's cabin for?"

"Why, we kin head off Nebraska Ned's coach, and your pa kin take it on ter Outfit City, and there wait fer you."

"You do not think his coach will be held up, then?"

"If it is, miss, Nebraska Ned kin lie out of havin' anything o' value along, and they will let it pass, for I know its your coach ther outlaws is layin' fer, and they expects ter git dead boodles of gold money and other things of value."

"Well, that might save what we have."

"It will, miss, it will, for I has had the hint that they only wants your coach this run."

"Ther word has been passed along, and ther Mountain Sharps is layin' fer us."

"Then halt the coach, please, when you deem best, saddle the horses, and I will go with you."

"You, miss?"

"Yes."

"And not your pa?"

"No, I will go, for I wish to put no extra fatigue on him, while I never get tired."

"But what will he say, miss?"

"Why he will let me have my way."

"Women ginerally does, miss."

"You seem to know my sex, Mr. Lumley."

"I was married once—that is why I'm out here."

The words told a great deal to Lola Insley, and she smiled, but said:

"Why, it is only a ride for an hour or two, in certainly good company, and then a trip in a coach all alone, as I heard the agent at the fort tell you that Nebraska Ned had no passengers."

"Yes, I will go with you."

"Well, miss, there is a good halting place just ahead, off ther trail."

"I'll soon have the horses ready, and if we can git to Lone Sam's cabin in half an hour, follerin' ther deer trails I will."

The halt was soon made, and Mr. Insley was awakened and told of the plan.

He demurred at first to Lola's going, but yielded at last, and, mounting one of the leaders, which Lige Lumley had saddled for her, while he sprung upon the other, they started off in the darkness.

"Just foller close behind me, miss."

"Ther horse will take you all right," said Lige Lumley.

So they went on, until they came to a part of the way where they could ride side by side, and the driver said:

"I only wish Buffalo Bill had been at the fort, miss, for I intended ter ask him ter go through to Good Luck camp with us, for he's one ther road-agents don't care ter tackle."

"But they told me he was away, so that ended it."

"Buffalo Bill is the famous scout of whom I have heard so much from the drivers along the Overland. Yes, and before I left California.

"He must be a wonderful man, if even a small part of the stories I have heard of him are true."

"He's all a man kin be, miss, true as steel, would fight ther devil with spurs on, and his heart is as tender as a woman's."

"You give him a noble character, and I am sorry I will not see him."

"You may, miss, as we might meet him, he bein' somewhere on ther trail ter Outfit City, they told me."

"I hope so; but you think we will get to Lone Sam's cabin in full time to head off Nebraska Ned's coach?"

"Oh, yes, miss, and time ter spare."

"But I'll leave yer when in sight of ther cabin, as there may be some one there, and it won't do for me ter be seen, or you ter make yerself known."

"Jist keep mum, miss, and say yer wants ter git ther coach ter Outfit City."

"I shall do just as you advise, Mr. Lumley, and I shall neither forget you or this night ride," answered the brave girl.

Soon after they came in sight of the lights of the cabin, and, springing from his saddle, Lige Lumley aided Lola Insley to dismount, and, while she went forward and was greeted by Lone Sam, he watched her, to see that all was right, and then rode back as he had come, to hitch up his team and push along the trail again, his mind much relieved by the thought that the outlaws would be outwitted by the brave girl's act.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A PROTECTOR.

Mr. Lee Insley did not take advantage of the coach being at a standstill to sleep.

He was too anxious about his daughter to go to sleep.

He counted the minutes until Lige Lumley's return, and felt greatly relieved to know that she was safe at the station of Lone Sam, until Nebraska Ned's coach should arrive.

He then mounted the box with Lige Lumley, the horses were started up, and Sanchez and Anita were told to take full possession of the coach and make themselves as comfortable as possible through the night.

As they drove along the conversation turned upon Buffalo Bill, and they were going at a good pace when Lige suddenly drew rein.

"What is it, driver?"

"I heard hoofs ahead. Ah! they is comin' agin."

"I hear them."

"They is comin' from behind, not in front of us."

"Yes; some one from the fort, perhaps."

"May be."

"But I'll feel better when I knows, though he don't seem ter be in hidin' himself."

"No, he comes rapidly along."

Soon after the form of a horseman was seen in the darkness, and in a minute more he dashed alongside and called out:

"Ho, Pard Lige, how are you?"

"All right, but I don't jist place yer—yes, yer is Buffalo Bill."

"Yes, the cold I have changes my voice."

"I heard you were driving an extra, and so came after you to see if I might

not be of some service, for I am told you have a rich freight along."

"Bless yer, old pard, its jist like yer."

"I axed fer yer when I was at ther fort, and they said as how yer were out on ther trail toward Outfit City."

"Yes; I has a gent along, his darter, and two servant folks."

"Mister Insley, this are Buffalo Bill, ther great Scout of ther Wild West, and of whom we were jist talking."

"I am indeed glad to meet you, sir, for I have heard much of you," said Mr. Insley warmly, while Buffalo Bill raised his sombrero and replied courteously, adding:

"I am sorry you are taking treasure through, Mr. Insley, as I have been informed you are by letter, and told to have a watch on you."

"Yes, I made a mistake, I frankly admit."

"I was too stubborn, and would not take advice, in fact, had no idea that we would be robbed."

"Ah, sir, you do not, indeed, know this Overland trail."

"The Mounted Sharps are thick in this vicinity, and I fear know that you carry a rich freight, in fact, I am led to believe, a large fortune in gold, gems, and paper money."

"It is true, sir, I was so foolish as to carry so much; but by the advice of our good friend Lumley here, I left about half the coin with the paymaster at the fort, in fact, all that we could get at, for the remainder is fastened up in a secret panel of the coach."

"But your paper money, sir, and gems?" quickly asked Buffalo Bill.

"That also my good friend here provided for the safety of, and he and my daughter entered into a plot to save it."

"Indeed!"

"But how was that possible, Pard Lumley?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"By outwitting ther sharps by sending ther young lady and her riches ahead in Nebraska Ned's coach."

"We just took cross cut trails, got to ther cabin, and there she caught Ned's old hearse, while I came back ter drive on serene in this."

"I tell yer, Buffalo Bill, we jist win this game on ther Mounted Sharps this time, ha! ha! ha!" and Lige laughed so heartily that it was contagious, the Californian joining in, then Buffalo Bill.

Then the latter said:

"You have indeed played trumps, Lige, and will beat the sharps on this run; but then you still have some gold aboard, as Mr. Insley says, and you don't wish to lose that, so I will ride well ahead, and see if there is any ambush ready."

"I will see you later," and with this Buffalo Bill rode on ahead at a rapid gallop, while Lige Lumley said with enthusiasm:

"That's ther man, Mr. Insley, and with him along we has nothing to be afraid of now."

"God grant it," was the fervent reply of the Californian.

CHAPTER XLV.

WHERE WAS BUFFALO BILL?

For some reason the scout rode very rapidly after leaving the coach.

The driver and Mr. Insley listened to the rapid clatter of the hoofs, until they could be no longer heard, and then the former said:

"Does yer know what I thinks, Mister Insley?"

"I confess that I do not, Lumley."

"Well, its just this:

"This coach might be thoroughly searched and nothing found of much value."

"Yes."

"Well, we told him about ther young lady goin' on ahead in Nebraska Ned's coach, and having lots of boodle along with her."

"Yes."

"Now I thinks he don't want her scared, and more particular robbed, and he's jist a makin' after Nebraska Ned

ter be on hand if ther is trouble and chip inter ther game himself."

"I sincerely hope so."

"I know it, from ther way he rides."

"He didn't want us ter think he'd give us ther go by, but he wasn't goin' ter see ther young leddy suffer from scare, and he'll be thar near by when wanted."

"Buffalo Bill is a noble fellow."

"You kin gamble on it he is, mister."

"He's a man ter tie to in a tight place."

"And you think if we get through to-night we will be all safe."

"Sich is ther chances, after yer leave Outfit City, though the trail is a bad one for outlaws clean past Good-Luck Camp."

"There must be a large band of these lawless fellows, to patrol such a long stretch of country as they do."

"There is plenty of 'em ter ther work."

"There is men as has been gents in their time, and Captain Coolhand is one of 'em."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know fer sartin, but they say he were once a rich man, and kilt somebody, hevin' ter come West, and, as he didn't know how ter work, he began ter git another fortin by killing and robbin'."

"He don't scare a little bit, rides like ther devil on horseback, can match Buffalo Bill in shootin' a gun or revolver, and hes got his men under his control like they was regular soldiers."

"I tell yer, he is a bad man from Bitter Creek, and I will be mighty glad when he runs agin a snag, and my idee is that Buffalo Bill is that man, 'cause its got ter come if he keeps up his red-hand work."

"Has he killed many people?"

"He has, fer he don't stand no nonsense, shootin' quick and dead straight when he wants ter show he ain't doin' ther robbin' act jist fer fun."

Thus the driver talked on, Mr. Insley deeply interested the while, and the miles were put behind the coach as the night wore on.

At last the driver drew rein to give his horses water in a broad, shallow stream they were crossing, and he said:

"Now, we'll soon be at Lone Sam's cabin, and then I'll find out in a sneakin' way about yer darter going on with Nebraska Ned, and if he seen Buffalo Bill go by."

"I shall feel easier in my mind then, and—"

The Californian stopped short, for suddenly out of the darkness ahead, from a thicket on the bank of the brook, came a command:

"Hands up, both of you!"

"Look behind you, and see that you are covered!"

Mr. Insley started at the voice, while a cry came from within the coach, as Anita, the Mexican girl, heard the stern command.

As for Lige Lumley, he took things coolly, and quickly raised his hands, saying:

"You do what they says; don't be slow!"

"But—"

"Look behind you!"

Lee Insley did so. What he saw was a form crouching upon the top of the coach, and leaning over the rolls of luggage, having his hands thrust forward and a revolver in each one.

"My Lord! it are a nigger."

"I pass," cried Lige Lumley, recognizing by the starlight that the man was a negro, or had face and hands blacked.

"Yes, massa, I is a nigger, and don't you go make me shoot yer, fer I knows ther cap'n," said the Black Highwayman in a low tone.

Up went the hands of Mr. Insley, and then Lige called out:

"Hands is up, so what does yer want, yer snarin' coyote?"

"Booty," came the reply, in the voice which had just spoken.

"Yer'll git none, fer we has played as sharp as you kin, sometimes."

"I know what you have and what you have not."

"I know how you played to win, but I always keep a few aces up my sleeve to play when wanted."

"Where is Buffalo Bill?" muttered Mr. Insley, his thoughts upon his daughter.

"Darkie Dick, disarm these men, make them enter the coach, and do you take the reins," came the order.

"Yes, Massa Cap'n," answered the negro, and to the driver and Mr. Insley he said:

"Yer must lay yer weepings down thar, on the top of the coach, gents, and crawl inter ther vehicle, fer I knows my business ef yer don't."

"We have got ter do it, sir, fer if we don't thar will be a funeral, as thar is plenty of 'em around in ther bushes."

"I shall be guided by you, Lumley," and Mr. Insley laid his belt of arms upon the top of the coach, the driver having done the same.

Then they swung themselves over the side and entered the coach, where Anita was trembling in terror and Sanchez was also badly scared.

"See here, nigger, does yer know how ter drive?" suddenly called out Lige Lumley, as the horses began to move.

"I'll attend to that, Lige Lumley," shouted the voice from the bank, followed by the words, called across the stream:

"Upon the other side, then!"

"Follow down the stream with the coach."

"Now, Darkie Dick, you know what to do," and the heads of the horses were turned down the stream.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A MAN IN MASK.

That the outlaws had taken possession of his coach and passengers was a surprise to Lige Lumley.

He could not understand it.

He saw that with the negro driving down the bed of the stream, the outlaws following on horseback, that there was an intention to cover up the trail.

This he could not see through.

Why should they kidnap the coach and all.

But he consoled himself with the thought that Lola Insley was safe, and the strange conduct of the outlaws made him fear for the lives of his passengers, and even himself.

At last he came to the conclusion that they believed the coach to be heavily loaded with gold, and not being able to carry it, they were determined to take it to their retreat as it was.

He had no idea that the coach could follow the bed of the brook, but it was certainly doing so, and the black driver he could not but admit was handling the reins skillfully.

Knowing that Mr. Insley and the two servants were looking to him for comfort, he felt keenly his inability to give them any.

"I am distressed about my daughter."

"She will arrive at Outfit City and be greatly distressed at our not coming," said the Californian.

"Well, there is one thing sartin."

"What is that, Lumley?"

"Buffalo Bill knows where he left us to-night, and you bet he kin foller us, ef they does leave no trail."

"He knows a coach hain't got no wings ter fly, and he'll track it to ther brook, and its got ter leave it sumtime—now, that black nigger do drive fust-class an' no mistake; but just ter think of a nigger fer a road-agent."

Unheeding the comments on the negro, Mr. Insley asked:

"Do you think Buffalo Bill will come in search of us?"

"I'll gamble on it he do."

"Why, he'll meet yer darter, and then, as we don't turn up, he'll take ther trail."

"And with some hope of finding it?"

"Ef he takes a trail he goes to ther end of it, so don't yer worry a little bit, fer, if they don't git mad when they finds ther boodle gone, and shoot us all, we'll be all right."

Anita groaned at this kind of consolation, though Lige Lumley meant well enough.

"This creek hain't got no end to it," growled Lige, as mile after mile was gone over and the coach still followed down the bed of the stream.

At last the dawn began to brighten the eastern horizon, and Lige said:

"We'll see how many of 'em thar be now, fer day is coming."

Soon after the coach turned out of the stream into a ravine, as the early morning light revealed it to be, and, with much interest, those in the coach peered out of the windows to see their surroundings.

Reaching a plateau, by way of the ravine, the coach came to a halt, and then upon one side of the coach rode a Chinnee.

"Oh, Lcrd.

"It's a heathen Chinnee," said Lige Lumley.

Then up rode a horseman, clad in buckskin, but with a mask wholly concealing his face.

"Thet's right, trot out ther rest o' yer menagerie, fer I likes ter see 'em.

"A nigger on ther box, a Chinnee on horseback, and a what-is-it who would get scared ef his face wasn't covered up —trot 'em out; trot 'em out," boldly said Lige Lumley.

"We are in need of no others to handle this outfit, Lumley.

"When more are wanted they will be on hand," said the masked horseman.

"Is you three all that tuk us in?"

"Yes."

"Ef I'd only hev know'd it, then thar would hev been a dead nigger, a Chinaman with his stump toes turned up, and a man about your size a lookin' fer somebody to buy him."

The man laughed, but replied:

"I am glad, then, that you did not know the fact.

"But, come, no nonsense, Lumley, or I'll have to leave you in the trail for the coyotes.

"You, sir, I feel sorry to have to put irons on, but you must submit, as also your man and this driver.

"The girl will not be found."

"Where will you take us?"

"I can answer no questions."

"Sing Low, get your irons ready and clasp them on."

"Allee leddy," said the Chinaman, and, with consummate skill and quickness he clasped steel manacles upon the wrists of Lige Lumley, who said:

"Ther first time in my life I ever wore 'em.

"But you jist wait fer Jedgment Day."

Mr. Insley made no comment, but quietly submitted, and Sanchez was also manacled.

Both the Chinaman and the masked man had had a horse in lead, while the animal belonging to the negro had been tied behind the coach.

At the command of the masked man the negro brought up the horses, the harness was stripped off their backs, and Mr. Insley's and his daughter's saddles put upon them, and the prisoners were ordered to mount.

"We must get rid of the coach, and that it may look like a runaway, four of the team must go with it.

"You know what to do, Darkie Dick."

"It's a pity, massa."

"Do as I tell you."

"Yes, massa."

"I'll unearth that gold from its clever hiding place," and with the axe that Lige Lumley carried the body of the coach was mashed in and the hidden treasure revealed.

What followed Buffalo Bill and Lone Sam skillfully tracked out, as the reader has already seen in sending the coach and four horses over the cliff.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE SEVERED MOUNTAIN.

It was with undisguised pain that the negro road-agent obeyed the order of the masked leader to blindfold four of the stage-horses and rush them to their death.

He plainly showed that it was against his will.

The Chinnee showed no emotion, simply obeying his orders in silence and with dispatch. When the coach had been stripped of all that was valuable the negro mounted the box, the masked leader rode upon one side, the Chinnee upon the other, and the team was started in a run toward the cliff.

Once fairly started the negro slipped over the top of the coach to the ground, the two mounted men riding alongside and lashing the blindfolded horses.

Mr. Insley entreated, Anita begged, and Lige Lumley swore at the leader, all in a vain effort to have him spare the horses.

But he was obdurate. The terrific crash of coach and horses on the rocks below was sickening.

But the masked leader at once turned his attention to his prisoners and the gold, and baggage taken from the coach.

All was loaded upon the led horses and thus the party rode, and the trail was taken up across the plain, where no trail was left, so flinty was the soil.

This was kept up for miles, when they came to a broad and well-worn trail leading from the river to the mountains.

The trail evidently went to a break in the cliffs, where wild animals could go down for water, and it had been made by their feet, until it was worn deep in the ground.

Into this trail the leader turned, and started toward the mountains, greatly to Lige Lumley's delight, as he had feared he would cross the river.

Several miles away was a lofty spur, jutting out from the range in the far distance, along the ridge of which the driver knew ran the Overland trail.

The range he well knew was seamed by deep canyons on either side, and was heavily timbered.

It ran in a zigzag course, winding for fifty miles thus, and was known to the drivers as the Devil's Back-Bone.

It was along the Devil's Back-Bone that the Mounted Sharps had done most of their red deeds, for they knew it thoroughly, could cut from point to point, and always find retreats in which to hide from all pursuit.

The spur that branched off from the range was some miles in length, ending abruptly upon the plain.

Toward this spur the trail now led that the outlaws were following, and Lige saw as they went along that the numerous wild animals that followed it to the river for water and back to their range in the mountains, would soon blot out all traces of their horses' tracks.

He noted the nature of the ground as they went along, kept his eyes upon the spur they were approaching, and which ended abruptly upon the plain, and saw that bold cliffs rose high overhead, while the trail branched off to either side, as the animals went to the right, or the left, according to inclination to make the mountain range from which this spur came.

The paths either way were well worn, the tracks were fresh, showing that the wild animals sought the river for water every day, or night, and then returned to their grazing lands in the range.

But the masked leader went neither to the right nor the left, for, watching for a plain where the soil was hardest, he turned out of the trail, heading straight for the cliff.

"Now what are he goin' agin that cliff fer?" muttered Lige Lumley.

As none of his party knew, they returned no answer, and the outlaws also remained silent.

Nearer and nearer they drew to the spur, and the leader was right up against

it, but still riding on, Lige Lumley watching him with greatest interest.

Then, to the surprise of the driver, the masked leader turned suddenly to the left and disappeared.

"Well, who would hev thought thar were a hole in that cliff," muttered Lumley.

But it was not a hole, a mere rent in the lower rocks, not visible ten feet away.

And into this narrow chasm, in single file, the others followed the masked outlaw, while Lige continually commented upon the strange entrance to the spur, and chuckled to himself over having found the way to the retreat of the Mounted Sharps, which thus far had baffled every one.

What good it would do him to know as a prisoner he did not take into consideration.

As the trail went on it gradually ascended, and, pursuing this rent, or chasm, after a quarter of a mile's climb, the leader was again seen to disappear, he being some fifty feet in advance of the others.

When Lige Lumley reached the spot where he had last seen the masked outlaw, he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

And no wonder, for what he beheld was a long, narrow valley in the very center of the spur.

It was fertile, heavily timbered, and here and there were lakes in it.

It was a revelation to the driver, for he saw how completely hidden was this valley in the centre of a severed mountain.

They entered it through a narrow gateway of rock, a chasm, where there had been built a barrier of bars.

Beyond was the beautiful little valley, and in the meadows were feeding a number of horses.

It could be nothing else than the secret home of the outlaws.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE DRIVER AND THE "BOSS."

When Nebraska Ned drove into Outfit City and reported to Captain Winter he was the hue of a corpse.

"Why, what ails you, Ned?" Captain Winter asked, kindly.

"I hain't feelin' jist well," was the answer, and the driver made a sign that he wished to see the boss alone.

So, after "bracing up" with a stiff drink at the saloon, Nebraska Ned went to the quarters of the boss and handed him the letter from Buffalo Bill, which Lone Sam had given him when he overtook him.

Captain Winter read it with a look of surprise upon his face, and then said:

"Tell me all you know, Nebraska Ned, for there seems to have been considerable going on, I may say."

"There has."

"First, Buffalo Bill has been held up, yet allowed to go on his away, after threats against his life."

"Yes."

"Then Left-Hand Larry gets out of trouble through Buffalo Bill, and in spite of both coaches carrying large sums of money, you lose nothing."

"No money."

"Did you lose anything else?"

"The girl."

"Ah, yes, Buffalo Bill says you will tell me about your lady passenger."

"I wishes I c'u'd tell yer more about her than I kin, boss."

"Where is she?"

"Ther Lord only knows."

"Tell me your story, Ned, from beginning to end."

"I'll do it; but don't Buffalo Bill tell you nothing?"

"He skims over things that have happened, not willing to put too much on paper, and says you will tell me about your lady passenger, and all about her must be kept as a dead secret."

"Well, it is a dead secret; at least, I don't know how it will turn out, only I

is in a worse fix than I ever was afore, even when ther road-agents was sendin' bullets about my head.

"I'll tell yer ther whole story, as I knows it, boss."

"Do so, hiding nothing, for if I am to be the judge I must know all about it."

Then, in his quaint way, but at times showing considerable feeling, Nebraska Ned told the whole story of the unknown lady passenger meeting the coach at Lone Sam's cabin, paying her fare to Outfit City, and then remaining passive inside until meeting with Buffalo Bill.

He made known how she had turned over the money and valuables she had with her to Buffalo Bill, when the scout spoke of the road-agents being abroad and that he had also given up the gold bags he carried to the Chief of Scouts, who was to carry them all to the fort until safe to send through.

His meeting with Left-Hand Larry, he made known, and then came the startling information of his discovery that his fair passenger was not in the coach.

"Not in the coach, Ned?"

"She were not."

"But she had been there when you met Buffalo Bill?"

"Larger than life she were."

"How did she get out?"

"Ther devil only knows, for ther Lord wudn't hev allowed it."

"You heard no outcry?"

"None."

"Saw no one?"

"Not a soul."

"You have no idea when she left?"

"I has not, sir."

"Remarkable!"

"It's wuss."

"I cannot understand it, Ned."

"Nor me."

"I know you so well that no more noble fellow holds the reins over a team on the Overland Trail than you."

"Boss, when I found it out I come mighty nigh shootin' my brains out."

"I was as weak as a kitten, as un-narved as a man at his weddin'."

"I do not wonder."

"I drove on, and all seemed like a dream."

"Then I were held up, and I did hope ther road-agents would kill me."

"Poor fellow."

"But then I thought if they did I'd never know what become of ther young leddy, and I am as cu'rous as a woman ter find out."

"I don't wonder."

"But I did git that reckless I made 'em shoot at me."

"You were wrong there, Ned."

"Not from my way of looking at it."

"Perhaps not."

"Well?"

"Then along come Lone Sam, and he set ther road-agents a-goin' in great style."

"Alone?"

"You bet."

"He knew that they were there?"

"He heerd ther shots, and he didn't count odds."

"Brave fellow!"

"You bet he is."

"I'll not forget him."

"Don't!"

"He's wuth rememberin' a hundred years."

"And what followed, Ned?"

"Ther Mounted Sharps skipped, and Lone Sam hed come ter tell me ter keep my mouth shet about ther leddy, 'cept ter you, fer Larry had seen Buffalo Bill, and he sent him quick after me, and with that note ter you."

"I guess Cody is right."

"He knows his business, boss."

"Yes, and it shall be as he wishes; but we must talk this matter all over between ourselves, and try and come to some solution of the mysterious disappearance of your lady passenger."

"I hopes so, but when a woman's in a case it's mighty hard ter sift it," was Ned's comment on women, whom he seemed to understand well.

CHAPTER XLIX. WAITING.

Captain Loyd Winter was much more worried than he showed to Nebraska Ned by this startling and mysterious disappearance of a young lady from an Overland coach without the knowledge of the driver.

He felt some consolation in the knowledge that Buffalo Bill had the money and valuables safe.

He talked the strange affair over and over again with Nebraska Ned, hoping to get at some solution of the remarkable disappearance, and the only thing he could settle upon in his mind to account for it was that some daring road-agent had gently gotten upon the step of the coach, opened the door unseen by Nebraska Ned, when he found out the maiden slept and then had gotten her under the influence of chloroform.

To then take her in an unconscious state out of the coach, and not be seen by the driver, seemed to be nothing short of a miracle.

But it had been done, presumably, for he could not, would not, doubt Nebraska Ned.

That a man had done such a thing would indicate that he was possessed of remarkable strength and activity.

In no other way could Loyd Winter account for the disappearance of the girl, except by suspecting Nebraska Ned of being in league with the road-agents.

Without thorough proof of his guilt he would not believe it of the driver.

Then came the question as to the cause of the road-agents having taken the lady passenger from the coach.

Their knowing that she was there was a deep mystery he could not fathom.

Knowing it, as they had shown, they must certainly be aware of her identity.

If so, she could only have been taken for ransom.

This, at least, was cheering news to the boss.

But still more cheering was the thought that Buffalo Bill knew of her being kidnapped, and evidently had some good reason for urging that it should not be made known.

This request of the scout Loyd Winter determined to grant.

He, too, did not care to have it known, at least until some clue as to the fate of the girl was discovered.

Nebraska Ned had reported it, Left-Hand Larry knew it, but had been told not to speak of it; Lone Sam was under the influence of the scout, so would not refer to it to any one, and the unfortunate driver from whose coach she had been taken would be only too glad not to have it mentioned.

Thus matters must stand until Buffalo Bill was heard from.

In the scout Captain Winter had more and more confidence.

He felt that his pledge to him had been no bluff, that he was working wholly to prove this in the end; but he said in a casual way, after he had talked over every point of the affair:

"Well, Ned, what do you think of the prospect of getting the lady back, if Buffalo Bill takes the trail?"

"She'll be found, dead or alive, if Buffalo Bill takes ther trail, boss, and ther road-agents will wish they never hed been born."

"Then you have confidence in Buffalo Bill?"

"Has I?"

"Well, I guess I has, and I only hopes he kin git away frum scoutin' around ther fort ter take ther trail o' thet poor leddy."

Captain Winter did not relieve Nebraska Ned's mind by telling him that Buffalo Bill had already started upon the trail of the road-agents.

He thought it best to keep that fact a secret, as he wished to let Buffalo Bill make it known in his own time and way.

So he said merely:

"Well, Ned, Buffalo Bill wished the af-

fair of the kidnapping kept quiet, so we must do as he says, and he may send us some word."

"I hopes so, for I won't sleep a wink until I knows jist how it all happened, and that ther young leddy is safe."

"Ef they has kilt her, then I gives up drivin' and takes ther trail ter avenge her, or lose my good-fer-nothin' life a-tryin'."

"You are a good fellow, Ned; but I hope it won't come to that."

"Of course you'll be ready to take the coach out on its next run to the fort, for you may meet some one on the trail that will have news for you."

"I understand, boss, you is afeerd I may go to drinkin' over my trouble."

"But I won't, I give yer my word, and will be ready when ther time comes ter start on ther next run."

"I have faith in you, Ned," and Captain Winter knew that he could trust the driver when he gave his pledge.

CHAPTER L. STRANGE REFUSAL.

Fort Faraway was well named.

It was far off amid the wilds, in the midst of the country where the Indians, but for its presence, would have allowed no rest to the coaches and pony-riders of the Overland.

In the fort there were several hundred gallant soldiers, a number of scouts, and as brave a lot of officers as could be found in any command.

Colonel Duncan was the commander, and his duties were severe and dangerous.

Many of the officers and men had their families with them at the post, and these, with the other persons about a garrison on the far frontier, the people of the Overland Stage Company, pony-riders, Buffalo Bill, and his scouts, and a cowboy contingent to guard Government cattle, made up quite a settlement of over five hundred souls.

The arrival and departure of the coaches and the coming and going of the pony-riders was quite an important event at Fort Faraway, while the constant scouting after Indians, the attacks of the outlaws on the stages, all made up a scene of excitement that afforded plenty of gossip.

Among all at the fort there was no one who held the high post of honor for heroism more than did Buffalo Bill, a true Knight in Buckskin, as he is known in the army.

His deeds of daring were of almost daily occurrence, and when he brought in a report all at the fort, from commandant down to the humblest private soldier, knew that it was true.

Time and again the wish had been expressed that Buffalo Bill would be allowed to go on a hunt for the daring road-agents known as the Mounted Sharps, and who, under their daring, cruel leader, were a terror to the country.

But the Overland Company was expected to protect its own coaches and pony-riders, and hence neither some dashing young officer nor the Chief of Scouts had been sent on the duty of tracking down the outlaws.

If they came up with them their duty was to capture them; but the vast country to be guarded by the soldiers from the redskin raids was too great to take men from that work and send them after a band of horse-thieves and stage-robbers.

At last, however, a demand had been made secretly by Captain Loyd Winter for help.

The Mounted Sharps were becoming so very daring in their attacks that they were getting unbearable, and the stage company were thinking of withdrawing their coaches.

Now and then, when it had come to such a pass, a direct demand on the military forces for help had resulted in a scouring of the trail from one end to the other by soldiers.

But not an outlaw would be seen then, and after a short while they would again reappear and be at their old tricks.

At last, as a couple of pony-riders, a stage-driver, and several passengers had been killed on the trail of the Overland Company, and many robberies had been committed, Captain Loyd Winter had determined to act upon the suggestion of one of his men and ask Colonel Duncan to give him the services of Buffalo Bill, and not let it be known that the scout was to go upon the track of the outlaws, and try and find their retreats, when a secret attack could be made upon them.

The result of this request the reader has seen, and how Buffalo Bill gave a pledge, which the Overland superintendent at first regarded in the light of a bluff, when he coolly told him he would unearth the Mounted Sharps and bring them to justice, or drive them from the stage and pony-rider trails.

But the scout's going on this mission was to be kept a secret from all save the very few most interested.

In this way, alone, he asserted that he could successfully discover the many spies who certainly gave notice to the outlaws when a valuable freight was to go through.

The arrival of Left-Hand Larry's coach at Fort Faraway, and the information he gave of having been held up on the way was not a surprise to those who were told of it.

But Larry had very little to say about it, made few comments, and did not say just who had held him up.

To Colonel Duncan, however, he had more to say, for the two young hunters, Burt Sprague and Maury Sanford, who were his passengers and had been kidnapped, he had to fully account for, that is, as far as lay in his power to do so.

It was a severe blow to Colonel Duncan, to learn of the capture of the young men, who were to have been his guests.

Their fathers were especial friends of his, and he had extended the invitation to them to visit him, knowing that they were fond of wild sports, and had hunted much in foreign lands.

Now, the coach came in without them, while Lieutenant Keyes fortunately brought in their money and valuables.

The capture of the young men had at once created intense excitement in the fort, and Lieutenant Keyes and other officers promptly volunteered to go after them.

To the surprise of all the request was met by a refusal from the colonel for any search to be made for the kidnapped men.

What could such refusal mean?

CHAPTER LI.

SET FREE.

Colonel Duncan was a man to act promptly when there was need for so doing.

But now he made no effort to attempt the capture of his two young friends, so boldly captured by the outlaws.

The officers at the fort could not understand the colonel's motive.

The truth was that there were none of them in the secret.

And the secret lay with Buffalo Bill.

The colonel had had a letter by Left-Hand Larry from the scout, and later by another by the pony-rider.

It was on the contents of these letters that Colonel Duncan remained silent.

The driver, Larry, had made known to the commandant alone of the fair passenger who had disappeared so mysteriously from Nebraska Ned's coach.

In his letters Buffalo Bill urged that she be not mentioned.

Also he requested that no effort be made to secure the two young men from the outlaws until he sent word to do so.

His letter went on to say:

"I have pledged myself to Winter, the superintendent of the Overland Company, to unearth these outlaws."

"If any effort is made against them now, in force, they will but take to their

secret dens like foxes, and we cannot find them until they again show themselves.

"Now alone, sir, I can find out what I wish, when numbers would spoil all.

"I am not wholly alone, for Lone Sam, the stock-tender, in whom I have perfect confidence, is aiding me secretly.

"I hope to send you further news soon, and I ask you, sir, to trust me wholly in this matter."

This was the letter that Colonel Duncan acted upon, or rather remained inactive upon, for he did trust the scout and leave it to him to work all out in his own time and way.

Then came another stir at the fort in the arrival of Lone Sam, the two detectives, and the Giant Miner.

Again Buffalo Bill's letter and Lone Sam's testimony decided Colonel Duncan in the intention of still leaving all to the scout.

When he had heard the story of the detectives, and that of the Giant Miner, with what Lone Sam had to say, he decided that Buffalo Bill was right in detaining the two secret-service officers.

So he ordered them and the miner to be kept under guard, yet be allowed the freedom of the fort by day.

Then he set himself to the task of looking over the papers the miner had intrusted to him, and the result was that he at once sent for the man.

"I have been looking over your papers, my man, and I find that they are most valuable evidence in your behalf."

"Are they not a proof of plots against me, sir, as against the others who were heirs, and whose death alone gave me a claim?"

"They certainly are."

"That was why I was entrapped to the asylum and held there in a living death, as it were, for years."

"They hoped to break me down, and failing, when I was escaping they sought to kill me."

"In self-defense I struggled with my intended murderer, and he fell dead."

"These detectives may or may not be in the plot, yet I believe they are, and I know they would have killed me on my way east with them."

"Appearances are certainly against them from their own actions, my man, and I have determined to accept your parole of honor to be on hand when wanted, and allow you to return to your mine."

"Oh, thank you, sir."

"I gladly give such parole, and you have only to send for me when you want me."

Colonel Duncan, after a moment of hesitation, wrote out the parole, and the miner signed it in a bold hand, having a very striking autograph.

"Now, sir, may I ask if you have any word to send to Buffalo Bill?" asked the miner.

"Do you expect to see him?"

"Yes, sir."

"When and where?"

"I shall look for him at Lone Sam's cabin, sir, for I believe I shall strike his trail there."

"Yes; tell him that I have perfect confidence in his judgment, and am doing as he requested."

"I will tell him, sir," and again thanking the colonel for his freedom, and declining a horse offered to him, the Giant Miner left the fort, going off at a long, swinging stride that rapidly carried him over the country.

CHAPTER LII.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE.

Upon leaving the fort the Giant Miner cast the miles behind him in a way that would have surprised a horse.

At last he turned into a little valley that narrowed to a canyon at the upper end, and there, hidden from view among the pines, was a little log cabin.

It was crudely built, but strong and comfortable, and it was the home of the strange man who had been driven by

cruel persecution to a hiding place in the far west.

The door was open, all remaining just as the two detectives had left it with their prisoner.

Within all was confusion; things scattered about as though a thorough search of the cabin had been made.

Books, border attire, weapons, cooking utensils, and provisions were strewn all about.

"They made a very thorough search, pretending to look for important papers bearing upon my case, but in reality seeking my gold."

"But they did not find it."

"Had they done so, then it would have become their property, my life would have quickly ended, and they would make no report of their valuable find."

"But Buffalo Bill cleverly saw through their game."

"God bless Buffalo Bill!"

Thus musing to himself, the Giant Miner was putting his scattered belongings again in their places.

He soon had all in good order once more, cooked his dinner, made a change in his wardrobe, rolled up a pack containing provisions and a couple of blankets, and with a rifle slung at his back, a belt of arms about his waist, and a pick thrown over his shoulder, started out as though on a prospecting tour for gold.

He turned his steps down the valley until he came to a bend in the shallow, sandy stream.

Here he halted, drew off his boots and socks, and, wading in among the willows, begun to dig down in the sand.

A few handfuls of sand being thrown out, he found a chain which he drew hard upon.

It raised an iron cover to a box, imbedded in the sand, and over which the stream flowed, the wash of sand quickly hiding all trace of what lay beneath.

Taking from his pocket a buckskin bag he had fetched from the cabin, he dropped it into the iron box, where there were a number of other such bags, all of them containing something heavy, it appeared, and being firmly tied up.

The lid of the box raising with the back up stream caused the water to rush each side, thus preventing the sand from flowing in and filling it up.

Having placed the little buckskin bag in the box, the heavy lid was again lowered, the chain dropped on the top, and the sand was quickly borne over it by the flow of the water, wholly concealing it from sight as before.

Retracing his way to the shore, the miner stooped to pick up his weapons and pack again, when suddenly two shots rang out, almost as one.

Following the shots, a bullet struck the handle of the pick held in the hand of the miner and buried itself there.

Instantly the Giant Miner sprung to shelter among the willows, his rifle ready, for the shots told him that he had an intended assassin near.

He had evidently been near looking at his cleverly concealed treasure, and the man, or men, who had tracked him meant to first take his life and then his treasure.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE SCOUT'S DEATH SHOT.

The Giant Miner was crouching among the willows, his face white and stern, his nerve as firm as iron, waiting like a tiger to spring upon his prey.

But only half a moment passed with the Giant Miner thus at bay, when he heard a shout from over on the ridge.

A strange foe it was to fire upon him and then hail.

But he answered the hail.

"Hello! where are you, pard?"

"Here among the willows, awaiting friend or foe."

"I am a friend."

"Do you fire upon a friend?"

"I did not fire upon you."

"The bullet struck within a few inches of my hand."

"It was meant for your heart, but my shot evidently changed its course."

"Yes; there were two shots fired. Where is the man who fired the other?"

"Lying here at my feet dead."

"Who killed him?"

"I did. He had his gun aimed at you."

"I was just in the second of time with my shot."

"Who are you?"

"First tell me if I am wrong in believing you to be the Giant Miner?"

"You are right. I am the Giant Miner, as they call me out here."

"I thought so, though I only had a quick glance at you."

"Again I ask, who are you?"

"Buffalo Bill."

The Giant Miner gave a yell of joy.

At once he sprung from his hiding place among the willows.

As he came into view in the flat, he saw the form of the scout appear on the ridge, a couple of hundred yards away, and where there was a thicket.

Instantly he waved his hat, and, picking up his traps, he hastily walked across the bit of meadow land and then up the hill to where Buffalo Bill stood.

The scout awaited him, and as he drew near offered his hand, which the miner warmly grasped.

"I thought you were at the fort."

"No. Colonel Duncan, after looking over the papers I gave him, sent for me and released me upon my own promise to return when he wanted me."

"I am glad that he trusted you, for I was going to send after you."

"After me?"

"Yes; for I believe you can help me, and Lone Sam is of the same opinion, so I was now on my way to his cabin to have him go for you."

"I am glad if I can serve you, Cody."

"I believe you are."

"I am just off of a scent, and took the way by your cabin, intending to lock it up, as I remember you told me how the detectives had left it."

"Yes, they left everything scattered about, in their search for my gold."

"Which they did not find, I am glad to see."

"You know, then?"

"That you were visiting its hiding place when you were fired on."

"Ah, yes, I was so glad to see you, Buffalo Bill, I had forgotten about the two shots."

"I was just going out to trail you."

"Ah! then our meeting is fortunate."

"You have been to your cabin then, for the door was locked."

"Yes."

"But tell me—who fired that shot at me?"

"He is lying up yonder among the rushes. I do not know him."

"I doubtless do," and the miner was about to walk to the spot indicated by the scout, when he turned and asked suddenly:

"How came you to kill him?"

"I was coming among the pines, the straw preventing my horse from being heard, when I saw a man skulking along, as though to get a shot at some one."

"He had his rifle in his hand, and I at once leaped from my saddle and ran to get a look at his game."

"As I came to where I could see the stream and the willows, you appeared in view, and at the same moment that I recognized you I saw the man come in sight in the edge of this thicket."

Instantly he raised his rifle, rested it in the crotch of a tree, and I had just time to head his shot off, as I saw that you were his target."

"I fired a second before he did, but it was time enough to destroy his aim."

"God bless you."

"You have once more been my friend."

"Come, let us see who he is," and the Giant Miner spoke feelingly.

Walking to the thicket he beheld a man lying there dead, a bullet in his brain.

"I know him, Buffalo Bill," said the miner quietly.

CHAPTER LIV.

A CLOSE CALL.

When Buffalo Bill and Lone Sam started upon the trail of the outlaws, from where they had branched off from the coach, the scout knew that he would only have the services of his companion for a day, and he was anxious to make all the headway in the march in that time.

It had not taken Buffalo Bill long to see that Lone Sam was to be relied upon in every way.

They readily followed the trail from its leaving the coach, and pressed on rapidly where it was not visible, for Buffalo Bill knew from the lay of the land that it could go in but one direction, or turn back the way it had come.

The latter he knew was by no means probable.

At last the two trailers came to the path leading to the breaks in the cliff, down which the game went for water.

They at once turned toward the river.

Arriving there, after watering their horses, a search was made of the surroundings, and they knew, if the outlaws had crossed the river with their prisoners, it had been a very long swim for their horses and a most perilous undertaking.

Especially dangerous would it be for the young girl and her maid, for it will be seen that Buffalo Bill regarded Lola Insley as being still with the others.

He had found her handkerchief in the shattered coach, and never once had connected her with the fair passenger who had so strangely disappeared from Nebraska Ned's coach.

That young lady was supposed by the scout to have come from one of the distant ranches, and Lone Sam was of the same opinion.

Why Lola Insley would leave her father's coach and go on ahead to take the regular stage Buffalo Bill had not considered.

So Lola Insley, the beautiful daughter of the millionaire Californian, was thought by the two trailers to be with the outlaws, along with the rest of her party.

The scout, however, half disrobed himself and started his horse across on the long swim.

He wished to see if the desperate crossing had been made by the outlaws and their captives.

But, arriving on the other side, after a very hard struggle for his horse, he saw no trails there, not even of game.

Wild animals would not risk that long swim in that surging river, and that seemed proof that the outlaws had not done so.

The scout also had a view of the cliffs on both sides, and was confident there was no place of refuge among them to be reached by swimming.

Fully satisfied that the outlaws had gone to the mountains upon the shore he had left, Buffalo Bill decided to return.

He felt a little anxious as to his horse being able to make it; but, without much clothing, only a small revolver, and no food with him, he must return to the shore he had left.

All that he could he spared the noble animal, and kept his eye constantly upon the other shore.

But after going half way the horse became more and more distressed.

Fortunately the scout had not brought him over under saddle and bridle, so he was spared that extra weight.

Finding that the horse was showing signs of failing utterly, Buffalo Bill shouted:

"Ho, Sam!"

"Ay, ay."

"Ride in and have your lariat ready to throw and give us a lift, for my horse will not make it, I fear."

In an instant Lone Sam was on the bare back of his horse, his lasso was coiled, and he rode in until the water was breast deep.

"All right, pard, I am here, and will swim out, if need be," he called out cheerily.

"I am all right, but my horse will never make it," was Buffalo Bill's answer.

A moment after the poor animal began to plunge madly, as he felt his strength going, and Buffalo Bill, who had already slipped from his back, had to swim hard to keep from being struck by his hoofs.

Seeing his master, in a vain hope that he could save him, the poor horse, with a longing for human aid, started toward the scout in mad plunges.

"Swim for your life!" shouted Lone Sam, as he saw the danger the scout was in, and he at the same time forced his horse toward him.

Buffalo Bill fully realized his danger.

He saw that the animal was making a desperate, despairing effort to reach him, not to harm him, but for human sympathy and help, and in his struggles, though they would last but a moment, he might reach him.

So he wisely dove deep beneath the surface of the river.

For a long time he was hidden beneath the waters, until Lone Sam began to grow anxious.

But at last he rose to the surface, far in toward land, and within a hundred feet of Lone Sam.

But the poor horse had sunk from sight.

CHAPTER LV.

SEPARATE TRAILS.

Lone Sam gave a wild shout of joy, as he saw his comrade rise above the waters and strike boldly out for the shore.

"I'll meet you, pard," he called out.

"No. I think I am all right, though it did blow me," came the answer.

But Lone Sam still swam toward his comrade, and, turning his horse, held out his hand.

Buffalo Bill grasped it and was thus towed ashore.

"He did strike me, and it knocked the breath out of me," said Buffalo Bill, feeling his broad breast where the iron-shod hoof had dealt him a severe blow.

"I am glad it was no worse."

"Yes, it might have been, for I too, might have gone down with my horse, poor fellow."

"I tell you, it was a close call; but I have noticed, Sam, when a horse is dying he always turns for sympathy and aid to his master."

"It is true, for I, too, have observed the same thing," said Lone Sam, and he added:

"Now, what is to be done?"

"Well, it is one horse to two men, and so I have a suggestion to make."

"Yes?"

"I am afoot, you mounted."

"Yes; but you take my horse, or rather mule," said Lone Sam, who was mounted upon a splendid mule large, long-bodied, and as clean-limbed as a deer.

"Thanks, Sam, but my experience with a mule has not always been a happy one," said the scout dryly.

"But that mule is a good one, and he's as fleet as a deer and can run a day and not feel it, while he can climb where a goat can."

"He doesn't seem like a horse, and is my especial property."

"Every crow thinks its own the blackest; but I guess your mule is all right, and to prove it I'll just take him, especially as he may have to play the goat act and climb."

"All right, Pard Bill, and I'll shoulder my saddle and strike for camp, for you know I have to get back to camp for tomorrow's riders."

"Yes, and I will push on and see what I can discover, and come for you when I find anything of importance."

"Good!"

"I feel awful sorry about my poor horse; but it was too long a swim."

"Yes, and proves that the outlaws

never made it, especially with their prisoners, two of whom were females."

"Sure."

"They have gone on to the mountains, where they have some securely hidden retreat, for I have hunted for them often before in vain."

"But this time they have prisoners with them, seven in all, as I count them."

"Yes, the Californians are—"

"Four."

"Then there is Lige Lumley."

"Yes."

"And the two young men they took from Larry's coach."

"Making seven; but then there is another."

"Who is it?"

"Nebraska Ned's passenger."

"Ah, yes."

"She will make eight, for they must have her. If not, where is she?"

"True."

"Then they have what luggage and things they took from Lumley's coach, the cushions, harness of two horses, and all that, so I have an idea that they cannot take away so many prisoners and not be tracked, when we are so close on their trail."

This was the opinion of both Buffalo Bill and Sam, and they at once decided that the latter was to go on with the scout until he reached the foothills of the range, and then follow it around to his cabin.

Buffalo Bill was then to continue on the trail to the mountain, mounted on Lone Sam's splendid mule.

Up through the break in the cliff they made their way, Buffalo Bill insisting that Lone Sam should ride until he had to do what he was pleased to call the "hoof-act," and they pushed on at a lively pace, the scout being a good walker.

At last they came to the mountain spur already referred to, and upon either side of which the trail branched off.

Thus far they had not been able to find any trace of the outlaws' trail.

There had been during the time that elapsed a great deal of game passing to and fro, and, as the outlaws well knew would be the case, obliterating every trace of the tracks of the horses.

So there they separated, Buffalo Bill remaining at the forks of the trails either side of the spur and Lone Sam turning to the left along the foothills.

"If you are not in by to-morrow night, as soon as the stages and pony-riders pass my station, I shall be on your trail," said Lone Sam.

"All right, pard; but it will not take me long to either find the outlaws' trail at some point, or be sure that I cannot find it, and I'll report at your cabin when convinced one way or the other," was Buffalo Bill's answer, and he stood by the mule, right where Lone Sam had left him, his eyes scanning every foot of ground afar and near.

CHAPTER LVI.

IN THE CAMP OF THE MOUNTED SHARPS.

When the outlaws, with their prisoners, less in number than Buffalo Bill and Lone Sam had supposed, entered the valley they knew the end of their journey must be near, and, after all they had experienced, they were not sorry.

The tethered and loose horses in the meadowland proved that a camp must be near, and could be no other than the retreat of the Mounted Sharps, their foes.

As for Lige Lumley, nothing escaped him. He just felt that the outlaws were making a sad mistake in allowing him to go unblindfolded into their retreat, for he intended to lead Buffalo Bill and his scouts back upon them.

"As soon as I git out," he added to himself.

It was a wise addition, but then, Lige had passed through so many ups and downs, he did not doubt that he would soon get out of this pinch.

Following a more defined trail by the side of the lakes, and into the timber

beyond, which grew beneath lofty cliffs, the outlaws led their prisoners to several cabins sheltered there.

A little rivulet flowed out of the cliffs clear and sparkling, and made its way into the nearest lake; the grass was plentiful and as soft as velvet, and the cabins were snugly ensconced in the heavy timber about them.

Two large dogs, which lay before the centre one of three log huts, got up and eyed the prisoners viciously, but a command from the masked leader sent the brutes off, and, turning to Mr. Insley, the man said:

"You are to take the cabin on the right with the driver and your man; the one on the left is for the senorita."

"I shall free your hands of the bracelets, but you are all to be manacled around the ankles, so that you will not go far."

"Do you mean that you will put irons on a woman, too?" indignantly demanded Mr. Insley.

"No; she can go free."

"But all of you beware not to attempt to leave your cabins, or the dogs will spring upon you, and the negro and Chinee will guard you, too, for I must go off on the trail again."

"One moment, pard."

"Yes, Lige."

"Are you Captain Coolhand?"

"I am not."

"Where is he?"

"He'll be here when wanted."

"We don't want him."

"Jist tell him ter stay away forever and ever, amen!"

The masked man laughed and said:

"I am sorry, but he cannot oblige you. He will return with me, and so will Miss Insley, whom he will have captured!"

"I don't believe yer; she went through O. K., and don't you forget it."

"If she was with Nebraska Ned she did not."

Lige felt a sinking at the heart, for he had hoped at least that Lola Insley had gone through safely, after her plucky ride in the night alone.

The masked man then ordered the negro to prepare dinner for his "guests," and gave the Chinee instructions to keep his eye upon all, for should they escape Captain Coolhand would kill them for neglect of duty, and then, on a fresh horse, he dashed away out of the valley.

"Well, pard, we is in it with both feet," said Lige Lumley, when the three men were alone in their cabin.

Mr. Insley glanced at the manacles about their ankles and said:

"Yes, Lumley, in it with both feet manacled. What do you think of his words about my daughter being captured?"

"I don't want ter believe him. If he gits her, too, he kin make his own tarms."

"I am willing to pay any ransom if she is in his clutches."

"As cap'n isn't here, he must be off on the stage trail with the rest of his band, so he may have her a prisoner."

"You do not think, then, that masked man was the chief of the outlaws? He said he wasn't. He is some officer, I guess."

"There is the negro; I will ask him."

The black outlaw was called and asked if the masked man was Captain Coolhand.

"No, boss, he hain't."

"Who is he?"

"Only ther cap'n knows, sah; some of us don't."

"Where is the captain?"

"On ther trail, sah."

"How many men has he in his band?"

"I hain't tellin', sah, so don't axe no more."

"Say, nigger, if you wants ter save ther black neck o' your'n from bein' stretched, and git dead oodles of dust, you'll jist help us out o' this scrape," said Lige Lumley.

The negro smiled, shut one eye, placed his thumb on the end of his nose, and

walked away in silence, while the Chinaman, whom the prisoners had not seen, laughed, and called out:

"Black nigger, Melican man, allee lightee."

CHAPTER LVII.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR ARRIVAL.

The black road-agent prepared a good meal for the prisoners.

All went to the rough table together, and were hungry enough to enjoy what was set before them. But Mr. Insley, anxious as to the fate of his daughter, ate only a little.

"Pard, yer hev got ter feed, if yer wishes ter work, and there is no tellin' what we may hev ter do to git away," urged Lige.

"If my child was only here with me, the dread would be little; but it is her unknown fate that tortures me," was the Californian's reply.

"Well, I'd like ter make a break afore ther chief and ther rest of ther band comes in; but I hain't jist sure what we could do with ther nigger and ther heathen."

"And the dogs," added Sanchez, with a shudder.

"I would not leave here now if I could, but will remain to see if they bring my child in, as that masked outlaw said they would."

"Well, pard, I'm hoping all will come right fer her and fer us. You see, sir, I have a sneakin' idee that Buffalo Bill will git on our trail and help us out."

"But what can he do, alone?"

"Ther hain't any man as kin do more alone than he kin; but he has got ther call on plenty of men if he wants 'em."

"But he may have been killed, for he rode on ahead of us, you know."

"California pard, I is one that don't believe ther bullet has been made ter kill Buffalo Bill."

"You think he bears a charmed life?"

"I knows it. And now, sir, I has an idee. The more I has thought it over since that man on horseback came after us last night, the more I believe he was not Buffalo Bill."

"But you recognized him?"

"I thought so, then, but I don't now."

"What has made you change your mind?"

"Well, ther voice wan't jist Buffalo Bill's, and then, he hed more ter say then it strikes me Buffalo Bill would, fer he don't talk any too much."

"Ag'in, if it had been Buffalo Bill he'd hev kept near ther coach, which that man didn't do."

"Who could it have been, if it was not Buffalo Bill?"

"Well, there is an outlaw in these parts that keeps himself mighty shy of showing up. He hev been seen now and then, and he was taken fer Buffalo Bill every time."

"How strange."

"No, fer he looks as like him as two revolvers resembles each other, if you don't look too close."

"If you do, then yer sees that it hain't Bill, but a sneakin' gerloot as calls himself Shadow Bill."

"Ah!"

"He were in the camps one time, playin' honest, an' were mighty proud of lookin' like Buffalo Bill, but some Government officers came along one day, lookin' fer crooks, and they spotted Shadow Bill as a feller that should have been hung some moons before for his crimes, and they were preparing to rope him in when he seen 'em, and, Lordy! how he did push ther breeze fer the wilderness, and since then he has been a reg'lar out and out road-agent."

"Now, ther man who come after us, might have been Shadow Bill, and I'm thinkin' it were, for see how them outlaws know'd all about where ther gold was hid in ther coach, and all else."

"So they did."

"And nobody knew that secret, you told me, but you and your darter."

"It is true."

"But we give it away to the man we thought was Buffalo Bill."

"So we did."

"So, says I, don't be surprised if he was Shadow Bill, and if he was, then Buffalo Bill is somewhere on the trail after us, and if he starts to rescue us you mind my words, Pard Insley, he's the very man ter do it."

"Heaven grant that you are right, Lumley; but, to me, it seems to be placing too much on one man, even if his name is Buffalo Bill."

"Wait and see, sir."

"I knows him from 'way back. He's a cyclone all by hisself."

Mr. Insley was cheered greatly by the confidence which Lige had in Buffalo Bill, and he said so.

While they were talking a horseman was seen coming up the valley at a canter.

"Great Scott! its Buffalo Bill, and he is coming alone into this den of thieves!"

"Now, nigger, Chinee, and dogs, look out fer fur to fly," cried Lige, all excitement.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE SCOUT'S COUNTERPART.

What could it mean? Did Buffalo Bill not know his danger?

Was he not aware that two of the outlaw band were there, and did he intend to daringly take the chances of a rescue of the prisoners?

The prisoners stood aghast at his boldness.

"He is coming to certain death. Would that we could warn him," said Mr. Insley.

On came the horseman, at a swinging gallop, his horse following the trail straight to the camp.

The prisoners looked toward the dogs, the Chinee and the negro, then grouped about the fire having their dinner.

They evidently saw the horseman, but it did not seem to alarm them.

As he drew nearer Lige Lumley suddenly smothered an imprecation and said:

"Thet hain't Buffalo Bill; it's thet skunk, Shadow Bill, who played us last night fer fools."

The horseman was now near the campfire, and the negro and Chinaman rose to greet him.

He was a finely-formed man, and with a strikingly handsome face.

He certainly looked the counterpart of the great scout at a glance, but a closer inspection revealed that, though he was about Buffalo Bill's size, wore his hair long, had a fine moustache and imperial, he was not the scout.

His face was handsome, it was true, but he possessed not the stamp of nobleness so indelibly imprinted upon every feature of Buffalo Bill's face.

There was an evil look in the eyes, a sinister expression about the mouth, and the man, when scanned closely, was seen to be altogether a different person from the famous scout.

The Chinee took his horse, the negro set to work to prepare dinner for him. For some moments he conversed with the negro, asking many questions and listening attentively to the answers.

At last the man sat down and leisurely ate the meal prepared for him. This over, he lighted a cigar and strolled to the cabin, where the maid, Anita, was sitting.

What he said to her the others did not hear.

Then he came over to where Mr. Insley, Lumley, and Sanchez were.

"Well, Mr. Insley, we meet again," he remarked.

"If you mean that you are the man who impersonated the noble scout, Cody, last night, I am sorry to say that we do."

"Yes, I am Buffalo Bill, the scout, when it pleases me so to be, as it did last night. It was clever in me, wasn't it, for I discovered all that I wished to know."

"Cuss yer ugly pictur, yer did," growled Lumley.

The man laughed, twirled his moustache, and replied:

"Don't call me ugly, Lumley, for I am said to be the image of Buffalo Bill."

"Yes, if yer black heart don't show."

"Go slow, Lumley, for I am in my own camp, and you should not beard a lion in his den, unless you wish to feel the weight of his anger."

"But come! I am here to have a talk with this gentleman, whom I am anxious to make terms with, for I neither wish to hold him or his beautiful daughter prisoners longer than can be helped."

"Great God! you have my daughter then in your power," cried Lee Insley, excitedly.

CHAPTER LIX.

CAPTAIN COOLHAND'S MASTER-STROKE.

For answer, the outlaw leader uttered a light laugh.

"When and how did you capture her, Cap'n Coolhand, fer I believes you is thet devil on horseback?" quickly asked Lige.

"I captured her last night from Nebraska Ned's coach, when she was on her way alone to Outfit City, having started to foil me and carry her father's money and valuables through in that way, hoping the regular stage would go through all right."

"It was you who put her up to this, Lumley."

"Yes, I did, and I only regrets she did not go through."

"Well, sir, as you captured my daughter, and with her a fortune, I suppose you will release us now, caring only for my gold and jewels?"

"But I did not get the fortune!"

"I do not understand."

"I captured the young lady, and she is safe in my other retreat, for I may as well admit that I am Captain Coolhand, so you will know with whom you are making terms."

"You captured my daughter, but did not get what money and jewelry she had with her?" asked Mr. Insley in surprise.

"Got the girl but not the money."

"He's trying to bluff yer, Pard Insley," averred Lumley.

"You keep silent, sir!"

"No, Mr. Insley, I did not get the gold and other stuff for the simple reason that Buffalo Bill, my handsome double, you know, met the coach, and I have a score to settle with Nebraska Ned, for he told the young lady to give the scout all that she had valuable with her, to be taken to the fort and kept until safe to go through."

"Good! Oh, Lordy, good!" yelled Lumley.

The chief cast a malignant glance at Lige, but continued:

"Now, Mr. Insley, what I have is your daughter and yourself prisoners, with your two servants and this man Lumley. In the way of booty I have the gold my lieutenant found in the secret hiding-place in the coach, and which you so kindly told me of last night when you thought I was Buffalo Bill."

"Now, Mr. Insley, I wish the rest of the gold you sent to the fort, the money and jewelry your daughter had, and then you and those with you are free to take the coach westward, for I will guide you to where you can catch it."

"I cannot give up what I have not in my possession, or I would, extravagant as your demands are, agree to your terms."

"You can write an order for the money and the valuables, and I will send a man to the fort, to whom they will be delivered."

"I will do so if our freedom, the freedom of all, can be secured by the giving up of the money and other things."

"But I must see my daughter and converse with her."

"No, you shall see her only when I take you to the other retreat to catch the coach, after I have your riches. She shall be my hostage for the keeping of your part of our contract."

"I am in your power, and can but obey. When shall I give you the order, though I do not know whom to draw it on, as I cannot tell in whose keeping my daughter placed the things?"

"Draw it upon the paymaster at the fort, and order him to deliver to David Jenks, assistant superintendent of the Overland Coach Company, your gold coin, paper money, and valuables, sent for safekeeping, when informed that outlaws were waiting to hold you up."

"State in that order that through the brave action and cleverness of Driver Lige Lumley, who drove your coach by a long trail around all danger, you were enabled to avoid the Mounted Sharps and arrive, after some days, in Good-Luck Camp in safety, and where you will await the coming of your property, Mr. Jenks being given a guard to accompany him by the superintendent at Outfit City."

"I will give you the full particulars of what you are to write, and if you do your part squarely by me, I will do right by you."

"You couldn't if yer tried, durn yer," growled Lige, who had listened in utter amazement to what Captain Coolhand had been saying.

The order was dictated by Captain Coolhand, written carefully by the Californian, and signed.

"Thanks! I shall start out to-morrow to make the greatest stroke of my life, one that will end my career as a road-agent, for I shall be able to live on my money and enjoy my later years," and with this the chief of the Mounted Sharps left his prisoners, just as night settled down upon the little valley.

CHAPTER LX.

AN UNFORTUNATE RESOLVE.

When Nebraska Ned's coach went on its way after its adventures of the night Lola Insley lay back upon the seat in deep thought.

She congratulated herself upon having gotten rid of her money and valuables, saved them from the outlaws through Buffalo Bill, and then the thought came to her that there was no need of her going on to Outfit City alone.

The extra coach could not be very far behind now, and suddenly she made the bold resolve to slip out of Nebraska Ned's stage and wait in the trail for the coming along of her father.

Did she tell Ned of her intention she knew he would at once put his veto upon her act. He could not wait with the coach for the extra to come up, and so she decided to quietly give him the slip.

She then watched her chance, and when the coach came to a rough part of the trail, ascending a hill, and where the timber was so dense all was blackness about her, she quietly opened the door, swung herself around upon the step, closed it, and lightly sprung off.

She lighted upon her feet and, breathing a sigh of relief, she stood there in the trail, watching the flickering of the stage lamps as it went on up the hill, to soon disappear.

When the last glimmer of the coach lights vanished, then only did Lola Insley realize how terribly rash had been her act.

She was alone in a wilderness!

The stage was not yet beyond recall, and she was tempted to run rapidly after it.

She called loudly, but if Nebraska Ned heard the cry he took it for the almost human screech of a panther.

At last she grew calmer. Her nerve returned to her. She began to take in her surroundings, even though it was an almost midnight gloom around her.

She moved about to at last find a large boulder, or shaft of rock. It was but a few paces from the trail, and upon this she climbed, after much effort.

A couple of dwarf pines were upon the top, and the spines from them made a soft bed, so she settled herself down, drawing her cloak about her, and with

her head on her arm decided to rest there in patience.

The long journey, however, had greatly fatigued her, and in a few moments she was in a deep sleep.

She was awakened by the sound of hoofs and the rumble and crash of wheels.

"The coach!" she cried, but before she really realized that it was the west-bound coach—it had passed along on the trail despite her call!

Once more she sunk to sleep, to be again awakened by the sound of hoofs.

A single horseman dashed by like a ghost in the darkness.

Could she but have known that it was Lone Sam going to overtake Nebraska Ned's coach!

A third time she slept.

This time she was awakened by hoof-strokes—those of Lone Sam's returning mount.

It might be an outlaw; so she was silent. But why did her father's coach not come?

Surely it must be along soon.

Once again she sunk to sleep, and her slumber was sound.

She awoke, chilled through; the day had dawned, and all about her was a scene wild in the extreme.

She had a little food that she had brought with her, and ate a small portion of it.

What could have happened to Lige Lumley's coach, she wondered. Had it passed her in the night while she slept?

She at once ran to the trail and gazed fixedly at it, to discern the tracks of the two coaches—the trail of the west-bound after that of Nebraska Ned's.

Her father's coach had not been along. Surely he must have had an accident. She was now very thirsty and walked on until at last she came to a stream.

It quenched her thirst, and she bathed her face and felt refreshed.

She would find a secure hiding place and there await the coming of the extra coach.

A secure hiding place was readily found, another outlying of the cliffs with a crevice in it, and dwarf pines clinging to it.

Again she heard hoof-falls—not those of the coach, but of a single horseman.

He went by like the wind, but she uttered no cry, for she feared an outlaw. It was the pony-rider westward bound.

After a long time the sound of hoofs again came to her hearing.

Once more she saw a horseman, but remained silent.

It was the eastward pony-rider.

She felt hungry and partook of some of her food.

Soon after the shadows began to deepen and she knew that night was coming on once more.

Not once, strange to say, had she thought of the stations where the stock-tenders were.

She felt that her father must soon appear, but she would prepare for the night as best she could.

CHAPTER LXI.

FACING DEATH.

Gathering a heap of pine spines Lola Insley made for herself a perfect nest in the crevice of the rock.

It was a long time before sleep came to her eyes, but at last nature yielded to fatigue, and she sunk into a deep slumber.

She awoke with a start. It was dawn.

But, surely, some sound had awakened her—what she did not know.

Arising, she found that her limbs were stiff from exposure.

But she walked to the stream, got a draught of water, and bathed her face.

Then she returned to her lair to decide what was best for her to do.

Some accident must have happened to her father, for no coach had passed in the night; there were no fresh tracks in the trail.

It then dawned upon her to walk back to Lone Sam's cabin.

It could not be over twenty miles away, surely. Why had she not thought of that before?

From there she could go to the fort.

The stock-tender had seemed so kind, and he surely would aid her in her distress and give her a horse to ride to the fort.

There, her story told, the officer would send out brave Buffalo Bill, she thought, to find her father.

She ate the remnant of her food, and then started upon her way.

That is, she prepared to leave the rock, when she gave a low cry of alarm and shrunk back.

There, not fifty feet away, she beheld a large mountain lion!—his basilisk eyes fixed upon her!

Down on the rocks she crouched, scarcely daring to move, and crouching fifty feet away, silent, motionless, save for the whisking of his tail, was the huge mountain terror!

How long she crouched there she could not tell. She had drawn her revolver, but dared she fire? She was a good shot, but what if she only wounded the fierce brute?

So the time passed until at last she once more heard hoof-falls.

It was a horseman, the sound told her, and she could welcome even an outlaw then!

He appeared to be crossing the ridge, and, a moment after, came in sight.

The panther heard him, too; saw him, uttered a savage growl, and refused to give up his hoped-for prey.

Then came a shot, a yelp, and she knew no more!

She had fainted when succor was at hand!

It was a woman's privilege, and she had availed herself of it.

Was it any wonder?

When she recovered she found herself lying on the banks of the little stream. Her hair was loose and hung in waves about her.

Her hat had been removed, and her face was wet, while a tender hand was bathing it.

She opened her eyes upon a face she had seen before.

After a long breath or two she said:

"You are Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, lady, I am."

"You saved me from a fearful death?"

"I am happy in coming along as I did.

"How do you feel, miss?"

"All right, now."

"May I ask if you are not Nebraska Ned's passenger of two nights ago?"

"Yes, I am that woman."

"Did the outlaws take you from his coach?"

"No, I left the coach of my own accord, to wait there until my father's coach came along."

"Ah! the secret is out, then."

"What secret?"

"You are Miss Lola Insley of California?"

"I am!"

CHAPTER LXII.

WHO HE WAS.

"Miss Insley, I am more than happy to have found you."

Buffalo Bill spoke with an earnestness that could but attract Lola Insley's attention, and she said naively:

"Not more than I am at having been found. Where is that terrible beast?"

"Lying over there dead. I shall see that you get his skin, head, claws, and all, as a reminder of your adventure."

"A terrible reminder, but I should like it, and I thank you. But, Mr. Cody, what are you going to do with me, now you have saved me?"

"Take you to Lone Sam's cabin and later on to the fort."

"Oh, sir, can you tell me of my father?" and in an eager, rapid manner Lola told just why she had slipped out of Nebraska Ned's coach.

"Yes, Miss Insley, I have found your

father," answered Buffalo Bill, after listening to her story with deepest interest.

"Is he safe, and—"

"All safe, but a prisoner."

"But I'll tell you as we go along, for I am anxious to get to Lone Sam's cabin, that he may go to the fort for help for me."

"You will accept a ride behind me on my mule, of course."

"Gladly."

He led the large and handsome mule up and lifted her lightly to a seat behind his saddle.

Then he mounted, and, as he crossed the trail, he said:

"I do not care to meet any one, so go this way to Sam's cabin."

"And my father is safe?"

"I'll tell you all about him."

So Buffalo Bill told the story of how Lige Lumley's coach had been held up and how it had been taken off the trail by following the bed of a creek.

The fate of the coach, and all, as he had read the signs, he had made known, and ended with:

"Now, when Lone Sam left me on foot, as he did, I came on, and, after some very good guessing, thinking, and trailing, I hit upon the retreat of the outlaws."

"I found out enough to know that your father and those with him were there, and then I decided to strike for Lone Sam's cabin, get help, and swoop down upon the outlaws with all dispatch."

"What guided me the way that led me to you I do not know; some unseen influence, I suppose."

"And now I can assure you that your father will soon be rescued."

"Heaven bless you!"

On went the splendid mule, caring nothing for his double weight, sure-footed and untiring.

At last the scout halted.

"Miss Insley, I caught sight of a man running along yonder ridge. Will you await me here for a few minutes, until I see who he is and what mischief he is up to?"

She slipped quickly to the ground, and Buffalo Bill spurred on for a couple of hundred yards.

Then his mule pricked up his ears, and Buffalo Bill halted.

A moment after, up the hill, the scout saw the man he sought.

"That fellow is tracking human game, I am certain," decided Buffalo Bill, as he shaded his eyes with his hand and looked up toward the bright hill-top.

He sprung from his saddle, hitched the mule, and, seeing that Lola Insley was still in sight, beckoned to her to come there.

She did so, but when she reached the spot where the mule was tied, the scout was not to be seen.

He had gone up over the ridge and disappeared.

What Buffalo Bill saw was a man crouching down and watching some one, or something down in a little vale.

A moment after the man rose to his feet, the rifle he carried was leveled with a rest against a small tree, and just then the scout saw the game he was after.

"My God! It is the Giant Miner!"

With this exclamation Cody's rifle flew to his shoulder and his finger pulled trigger a second in advance of the one whose shot was to kill the miner!

The reader knows the result, and also how it was that Buffalo Bill came to be there at that time.

When Buffalo Bill had told the miner that he was not alone, and they went to see the body of the man who had fallen under the scout's deadly aim, the latter had quickly said:

"You say that you know him—who is he?"

"David Jenks, the assistant superintendent of the Overland Company."

Buffalo Bill gave a loud whistle, and said:

"What was his motive in wishing to kill you?"

"He had two motives—first, he wished to get my gold, and second, he knew that I suspected him of being the secret ally or spy of the Mounted Sharps."

"Was he?"

"You saw that he aimed at my life, so a man who would do that could be guilty of any crime."

"That is true; but his career is ended, and the Mounted Sharps will not be long behind him."

"I hope not, for I was going to give you aid in hunting them down, as I have lately been secretly on their trail, and know their retreat."

"In a valley that severs a mountain spur over toward the river?"

"Ah! you too know it."

"Yes, I have tracked them, and am now going to Lone Sam's cabin to send to the fort for help."

"No need of help. There are but three, the chief, a negro, and a Chinese, with this dead man their secret ally"—at which information Buffalo Bill gave another whistle of surprise.

CHAPTER LXIII.

A TRIO ON THE TRAIL.

It was a ghastly companion for a ride, the body of the dead superintendent strapped over the saddle to carry it to Lone Sam's cabin, but brave Lola Insley had suggested that it should be so.

The dead man was borne to Sam's cabin and Lola rode behind as she had on her way across the country.

Buffalo Bill and the Giant Miner walked, and led the way at a very quick gait.

After several miles the miner hastened on to prepare for the coming of Miss Insley, and, if in time, to hold the two pony-riders who should arrive that day, until the scout should come in.

When Buffalo Bill and Miss Insley reached the cabin the miner had been there for a quarter of an hour, and Lone Sam had heard the story of what had occurred.

The pony-riders had not arrived, and Miss Insley was at once given possession of the cabin, while the body of the superintendent was put in a small hut near.

Buffalo Bill wrote two letters, one to Colonel Duncan, the other to Captain Loyd Winter. Of the former he asked that an escort of cavalry be sent the next day to Lone Sam's cabin, that was all.

To the superintendent he wrote that it was important he should come with all dispatch to Lone Sam's cabin, and to bring an extra coach with him.

In conclusion he said:

"When you reach the cabin you will see if it was a game of bluff on my part or not."

Both Buffalo Bill and the Giant Miner kept out of sight when the pony-riders dashed up to the cabin, and as Lola Insley was already domiciled in Sam's pleasant quarters, they saw only the stock-tender, received the letters, and dashed on their way.

Then Lola was told to make herself perfectly at home and to "hold the fort" until the return of the three men, who were going upon an expedition that they hoped would prove a grand success.

Cody and Lone Sam had held a long talk with the Giant Miner, and were convinced that he was right in his assertion that the Mounted Sharps numbered only three men in the field—Captain Coolhand, the Chinaman, and the negro, with the traitor assistant superintendent, Jenks, as an occasional ally to swell the force. He told just how the trails ran from the ridge known as Devil's Back-Bone, so the scout and stock-tender could see how three men could hold a coach up a dozen times within a fifty mile drive.

"They have a framework in which rifles are placed, so that half a dozen guns can be fired at once, and in other ways give an idea of numbers, while Captain Coolhand is an expert ventrilo-

quist and can give an order and answer it at a distance, in a wonderful way."

"I have watched them, and was slowly laying my plans to one day strike a blow and alone rake in the whole outfit."

Mounted upon fresh horses the three rode off upon the trail to the retreat of the Mounted Sharps.

They reached the secret valley in the night, and quietly waited for dawn.

Their first duty was to round up the outlying horses, for no watch was kept, and half a hundred splendid animals were driven into the log corral near the entrance to the valley.

Then the three daring men moved cautiously on foot toward the cabins.

They approached near to the cabins, the wind fortunately being in their faces, so that the dogs did not get the scent. There they waited.

At last, as the morning broke, the negro outlaw stepped out of a cabin and came toward the campfire.

"Darkie Dick!"

"Who dat callin' me?"

"Buffalo Bill!" and he stepped into view as he spoke.

"Lordy, Massa Bill, I thought it were a voice from de clouds."

"I so glad ter see yer, sah! But, come out o' sight, quick, fer I has got somethin' ter tell yer."

The negro quickly led the way into the bushes, but started, as he saw the scout was not alone.

"Massa Bill, and gemmans, I tells yer honest, I hain't no outlaw," he protested.

"Yer see, sah, when I were at ther fort my old massa come thar, and he know'd I were suspected of a murder, and so he jist told me he were in it fer money."

"Well, Massa Bill, I were terrible distressed, and didn't know what ter do, until one night he come to me and says how he hed jest robbed all the officers, fer he were what he call a professional burglar, and as he hed fixed it so I would be suspected, I must git out and wait fer him at a certain place."

"Lordy! I was jist scared ter death, and only too anxious ter go; but when I started, he bein' with me, ther guard he stepped up, and he, not me, kill him."

"I had the big bag of things he had stolen, and he hed arranged fer me ter take 'em all, an jist how ter escape."

"It were some days arter that he come and join me, and he said as how I would be hung fer ther murder of ther guard."

"Then he told me he were going inter ther road-agent business, that he hed a pard who was one of the bosses of the Overland Company, and a Chinee who wan't afeard of ther Devil, and he knew the country perfect."

"Well, sah, he forced me ter help him, and that's the whole trufe of de matter, and if I has ter hang I can't tell no more dan de trufe."

"You have been more sinned against, Dusky Dick, than sinning, and if you will help us out now, I'll make it all right for you."

"Deed, Massa Bill, I does anything you says, an' yer knows what I tells yer 'tother day about ther California coach and all dat?"

"Yes, I trust you; but how many men are in the band?"

"Ther chief, sah, who are Cap'n Coolhand, and who, when he hev his beard cut right, though he hed a smooth face when at ther fort, plays he is *you*, sah, but were known in ther camps as Shadde Bill."

"Ah!"

"He's been a actor, sah, and he kin make himself look like a couple o' dozen men if he wants ter."

"I see. Who else has he?"

"That boss of de trail, sah."

"David Jenks, you mean?"

"Yas, sah. It is he who gives up all de news to de chief."

"Aha! that accounts for the robberies, but he is safe, so now tell me of the others."

"Only the Chinee, sah, an' me."

"Those are all?"

"Yes, sah."

"You have prisoners here?"

"We has, sah; but I already done tolle de gemman I were goin' ter let you know."

"That is in your favor. The outlaws have harmed none of the prisoners?"

"No, sah."

"And the two young men taken from Left-Hand Larry's coach?"

"They is in a little cabin up dis valley, sah."

"And where is Coolhand?"

"In de cabin whar de young men is."

"And the Chinee?"

"Yonder he come now, sah."

CHAPTER LXIV.

CONCLUSION.

The Chinaman was approaching the camp-fire, and in the dim light of dawn did not see the men standing in the shadow of the timber.

Another moment, and Buffalo Bill had thrown his lasso, and dragging the celestial to the earth, he was quickly bound by Lone Sam and the miner.

Then the party started for the upper cabin, half a mile away, and "Dusky," or Darkie Dick, knocked at the door, calling to Captain Coolhand to open it.

He did so, but with revolver in hand, and instantly recognized Buffalo Bill as the latter covered him.

There were two quick shots, but the scout was the quicker in drawing trigger, and the outlaw chief fell with a mortal wound.

He did not live many minutes, but before he died he told that "Dusky" was not guilty of the crimes of which he had been accused, and revealed just where all the stolen property could be found.

"I was born bad, and so I die. But, so be it. It is in the chances of outlawry. I failed in the moment of success, and I accept my fate at your hands, Buffalo Bill."

Such were his last words.

The two young men, Sprague and Sanford, were found in the cabin heavily ironed, and their joy at their release was great.

On their way to the lower cabin all heard several shots fired, and hastened on.

"It's all right, pard's! Thet Chinee were about ter git away, and I kilt him," cried Lige Lumley.

"I let ther dogs hev it, too, 'cause they come fer me," he added.

Then he explained that he had heard voices, had come out of the cabin, and saw the Chinaman lying bound at the camp-fire.

He walked toward him and saw that the Mongolian had just freed his feet of the bonds, and he continued:

"Ther Mexican gal hed a shooter they hed not tuk from her, and she hed given it to me."

"You bet it come in fine just then, and I let China hev it, and then come ther dogs on a rush, fer they had been hunting in ther timber, I guess."

"So I give them a dose of ther same medicine and they went ter sleep."

"Pard Bill, I said you would do it and you has."

Explanations followed all around. Mr. Insley quickly learned of Lola's safety, and that she was waiting for him at Lone Sam's cabin.

"Dusky" then went to work to get breakfast for all, and Lone Sam, the miner and Lige Lumley brought up the horses from the corral, and begun to pack on them the booty from the cabins.

The bodies of Captain Coolhand and the Chinee were also taken along, and the party started for the stock-tender's cabin.

On the way Buffalo Bill turned aside to get the gold he had taken from Left-Hand Larry's coach and hidden, and he arrived at Lone Sam's cabin soon after the others.

Of the meeting of father and daughter

I need not speak, for it can be readily imagined.

Mr. Insley decided to go on to the fort, as the scout deemed it best, and the escort from the fort arriving under Lieutenant Keyes, accompanied his party there.

Cody remained at the cabin with Lone Sam and "Dusky," awaiting the coming of Captain Winter.

The latter had come through in an extra coach with all speed, and at once heard the whole story of his brother officer's treachery to the company, glanced at his body, heard what Dick had to say, and said:

"Well, Cody, you have kept your word, and done more than I believed it was possible for one man to do. The company will ever hold you in remembrance."

The bodies of the dead chief, of Jenks, and the Mongolian were then buried, and all then started for the fort in the extra coach, which was to be given to Mr. Insley to continue on his way in.

At the fort the whole story was again told and Darkie Dick, or "Dusky," as the outlaw chief had christened him, was exonerated from all blame and became Buffalo Bill's black scout, of which appellation he was very proud.

The Giant Miner also decided to go east and show how he had been persecuted, and the two detectives found matters reversed, for they went as his prisoners, Lone Sam accompanying him, for it was shown that he was well-to-do in this world's goods, and had only come to the frontier to enjoy a couple of years of wild life and hunting.

On the way the extra coach followed the regular closely, but both passed through unmolested, and Mr. Insley and his lovely daughter reached their eastern abiding place in safety with all their riches and in less than a year Lola became the wife of Lee Roberts, once known as Lone Sam of the Overland.

The Giant Miner, it may be said at once, turned the two detectives over to the proper authorities, told his story in full, and proved the persecution against him.

The result was that he got the inheritance left him, and was merciful to the two men who had been in the employ of his foes.

Thus ends the trail on the Overland, which Loyd Winter had first called Buffalo Bill's Bluff.

THE END.

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